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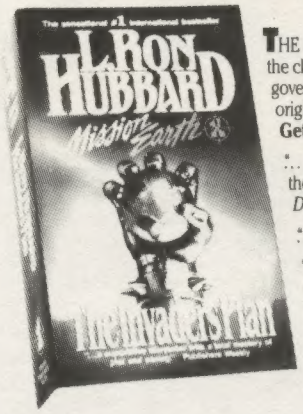

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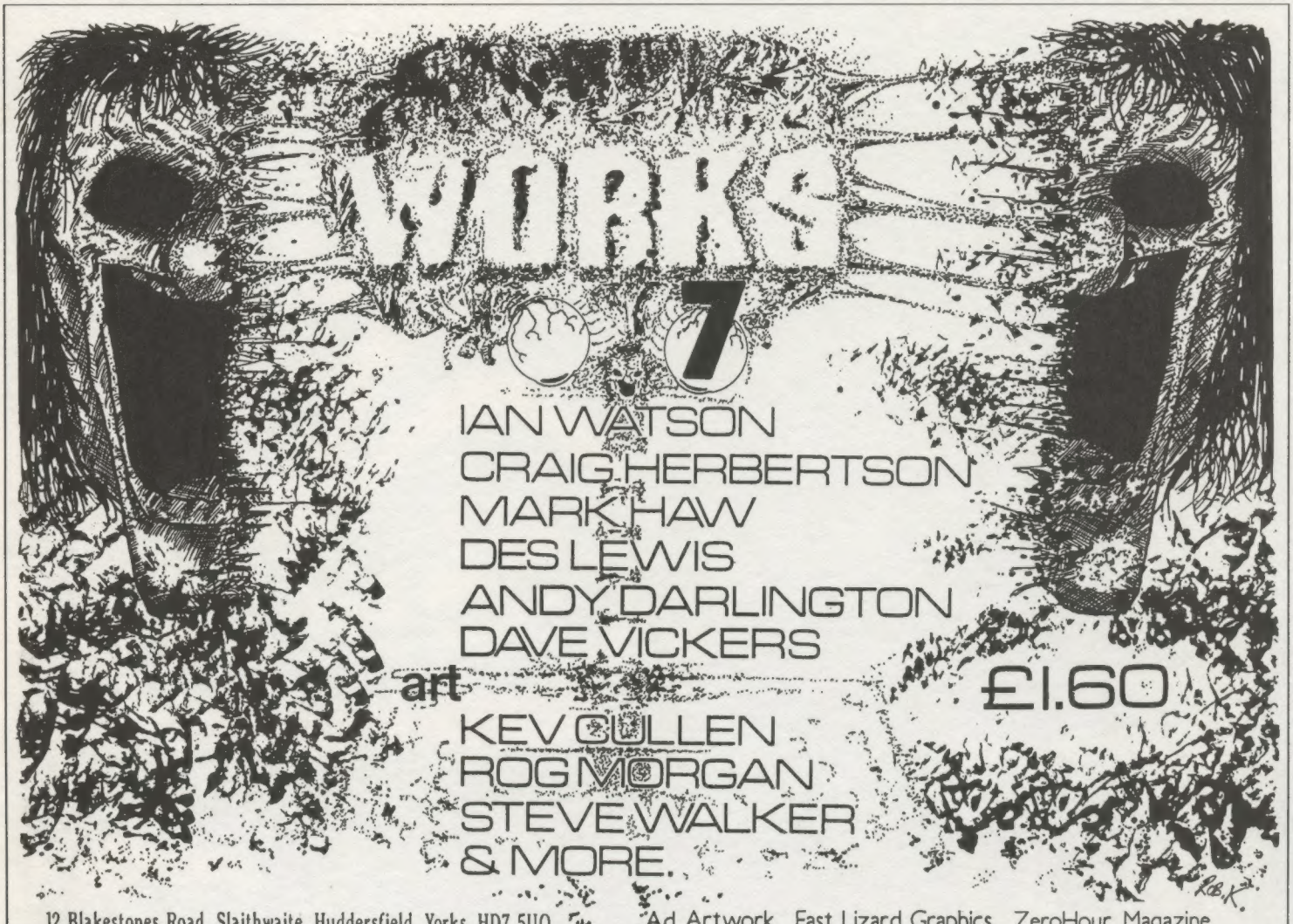

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BBR

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This issue is illustrated by:

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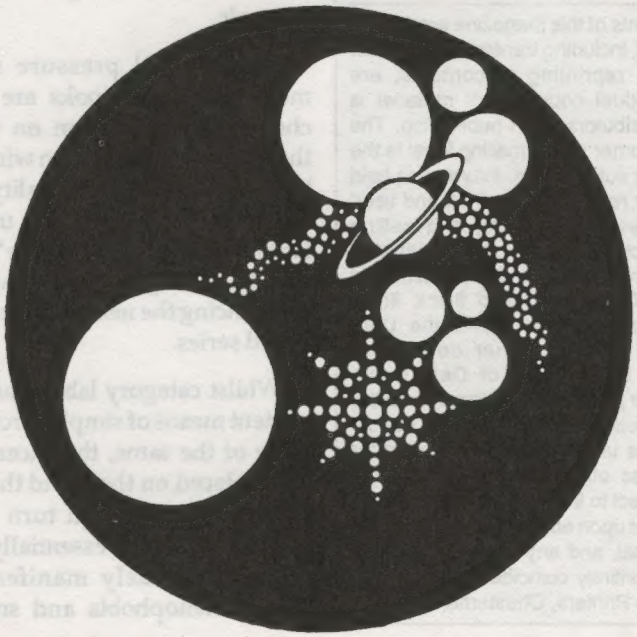

BACK BRAIN RECLUSE

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Surviving the SF supermarket

First came cyberpunk. Then we got splatterpunk and steampunk. Now it's cowpunk and, believe it or not, Cthulhupunk.

Back in the 'good old days' it was a straightforward choice between 'mainstream' and 'science fiction'. That was until 'New Wave' created a fresh division of opinion in the late 1960s. More recently, we have witnessed the fight between the 'Cyberpunks', represented by Gibson, Sterling et al in one corner, and the 'Humanists' led by John Kessell in the other; interviewers still ask if writers see themselves as cyberpunk authors, and argue whether Pat Cadigan can be a cyberpunk even though she's a woman.

Increasing commercial attention to SF has signalled a corresponding increase in the importance of how the various categories and sub-categories are labelled. These different labels are, of course, applied after the act in a characteristic attempt to box things tidily away, though not surprisingly, many of the writers concerned have resented being grouped – often arbitrarily – into these categories.

Sadly, the immense popularity of the cyberpunk bandwagon has made it imperative to find new 'movements' under every stone. A whole stream of derivatives is now in circulation, and the obsession has reached such a stage that categories are being invented *even before* there's any fiction to put in them. Witness the recent 'Technogoth' as a typical example.

Commercial pressure means that more and more books are now being chosen for publication on the basis of their similarity to known winners, rather by their degree of originality or innovation. And if you can sum up that similarity with a simple label like 'cyberpunk', then launching a title becomes as easy as announcing the next volume in a shared-world series.

Whilst category labels may be a convenient means of simply force-feeding us more of the same, the excessive importance placed on them and the strict need to adhere to them in turn promotes a mentality that is essentially introspective. This widely manifests itself in literary xenophobia and snobbishness, the attitude that if it's not SF/cyberpunk/etc, then it must be of inferior quality.

But, as William Gibson so pointedly stated in *SF Eye* #1: "The kind of hit of imagination that science fiction people assume is the provenance of science fiction is in fact the provenance of fucking well being able to write ... Anything that is sufficiently well-written will provide the same thrill of disorientation because it's giving you a new experience."

And the same applies to fantasy, horror, and every other artificial category. Ultimately, it's the readers and writers who suffer.

So surely, what matters most of all is not the label used to make it sell well, *but the writing itself?*

It is ironic that the two most revitalising trends in SF – New Wave and cyberpunk – both started with writers experimenting with themes and ideas from outside the genre. And though now you should be prepared to look a bit harder for them, there are still writers making that kind of spontaneous crossover.

In their essays in *SF Eye* #5 on the 'Science Fiction Underground' and 'Slipstream', John Shirley and Bruce Sterling both champion the cause of writers – old hands and Young Turks alike – who are still too adventurous, far-sighted or wide-ranging in their work for successful promotion under established labels. Shirley in particular describes how such writers are turning to the greater freedom of creativity afforded by the "alternative press". Now more than ever, the independent and small press provides an outlet for the newest and most innovative speculative and science fiction.

We prefer to judge authors by the innovation and originality of their writing, that 'thrill of disorientation', than by any label. That's why **BBR** publishes all kinds of fiction, be it mainstream, 'traditional' SF, fantasy, speculative fiction, horror, or some as yet undefinable mixture of the lot. This helps to provide the variety of content that we feel makes **BBR** unique.

We don't believe that new ideas are the exclusive domain of new and unknown writers either, which is why we are pleased to feature 'big-name' writers like Paul Di Filippo, Garry Kilworth,

Misha, Michael Moorcock, Wayne Allen Sallee and Don Webb.

As a result of not pigeonholing our fiction, there is no out-of-bounds to what we will consider. There are no criteria of "we can't publish that, it's not science fiction". That's little more than censorship of ideas. Instead, if we enjoy a story and find it refreshing, and it's something new to us and to **BBR**, then we print it in the magazine.

That openminded approach to what we publish has apparently provided some amusement for certain quarters, who perhaps misunderstand our policy. We're not being avant garde simply for avant garde's sake, but rather, we are products of our age. We have a low boredom threshold. Having found a 'new experience', we've no intention of just sitting back and milking it to death. We'd rather be looking for the next new experience. The most obvious result is that every issue of **BBR** is different, every issue in itself a new experience for the reader, not only in terms of the fiction, but also in terms of the way it's presented.

We take the same attitude towards our readers as we do towards our writers. If we were to treat you not as individuals, but as some marketing category, we'd be obliged to choose stories on the basis of what's going to please our 'average reader'. However, by refusing to cater to the lowest common denominator in that way, we aim to maintain a higher quality of fiction in the magazine overall. That ambition has in turn become self-fulfilling, for **BBR** subscribers now *expect* that standard from each issue of the magazine, and will not accept anything less.

But don't get the idea that **BBR** is the only place where you'll find the new fiction. There's a wealth of other material sidestepping the commercial categories by being published in the independent and small press. Different editors may have different tastes, but every magazine reflects a similar need for creative freedom and individual expression. **BBR** *Review* is an attempt to promote that amazing variety of publications currently available in the UK and abroad, as is **BBR**'s participation as a member of the New Science Fiction Alliance.

In that respect, we urge you to treat **BBR** as our latest recommendations of what we've found new and exciting over the past three months. You can use **BBR** as a springboard into the new ideas and new experiences of the alternative press in general, or simply for the stimulation and interest of the fiction that we feature.

Either way, you must be prepared for a change. The existing label structure encourages discrimination against anything which does not conform, and has left SF in a state of stagnation and decay.

But this other fiction sidesteps the conventional categories and their prejudices, forcing us to meet the fiction on its own terms. There is immediately a greater willingness to learn from other types of writing, to experiment with what we read and to expand our tastes as readers.

At last, the ideas and new experiences become the significant factor once more. And after all, that freedom of ideas is what's supposed to make science fiction so special. ❑

Our New Mexico Correspondent ...

We'd like to welcome Uncle River to **BBR**. His regular column of reports from the New Mexico town of Mogollón starts on page 17.

Mogollón was founded in 1887 and, until the 1940s, produced most of the gold and silver to come out of New Mexico. At the peak of its mining activities it had somewhere between 2,000 and 8,000 inhabitants, but it is now a ghost town with a population of just 30.

It is situated in an extremely remote and inaccessible narrow canyon, 6,500 ft up in the mountains which form one of many forested islands in the southwestern desert. Mogollón itself is surrounded by 3 million acres of the Gila National Forest, which includes about half a million acres of official designated wilderness.

To help put it into perspective, Catron County, near whose southwestern corner Mogollón is found, has a population of 2,500, and is about the same size as Wales ... ❑

Market round-up

Noel Hannan has asked us to mention that from issue #4 *Nightfall* will become an all-strip anthology, with strips coming up from the likes of Kevin Cullen and Dreyfus. *Nightfall* #3 costs £1:75/$4 and is available from Noel Hannan, 18 Lansdowne Road, Sydney, Crewe, Cheshire CW1 1JY.

A new SF magazine as yet untitled has been announced by Alan Garside, himself well-known as a contributor to the NSFA magazines. All contributions should be sent to Alan at Flat 2, 208 Wellington Road North, Stockport.

Zerohour is a new magazine of strange art and fiction from Fast Lizard Graphics in Huddersfield. Rob Kirbyson has also been collaborating on forthcoming issues of *Works*, and you can reach him at Fast Lizard Graphics, 20 Thorpe Green Drive, Leymoor, Golcar, Huddersfield HD7 4QU.

As always, be sure to enclose adequate return postage when sending submissions or writing for information. ❑

BBR on tour

BBR will be attending the following conventions, and manning a stall with other NSFA editors and contributors. Any readers who care to drop by for a chat and a few beers will be very welcome.

1991:

29 March – 1 April: Speculation (42nd British SF Convention), Hospitality Inn, Glasgow.
24–26 May: Mexicon 4, The Old Swan Hotel, Harrogate.
27–30 September: Albacon '91, Central Hotel, Glasgow.

1992:

17–20 April: Illumination (43rd British SF Convention), Norbreck Castle Hotel, Blackpool.

All details courtesy of *Critical Wave* – see their latest issue for contact addresses, registration fees and other relevant information (£1:50 from Critical Wave, 845 Alum Rock Road, Ward End, Birmingham B8 2AG). ❑

THE ALIENS' MIDWIFE

DAVID HAST

Ben would walk for miles and not remember a thing. The sky would darken, lightning pierce the veil, and he'd trudge on, oblivious. A man was stabbed once right there as he passed under a bridge, and he'd missed it.

Then on other days, his senses would focus, and people's faces and lives jumped out at him with an almost intolerable clarity. He'd be reinstilled with the grim sense of purpose. Adzemas. It would recede so far, the name go foreign, only to return without warning, along with the messages.

When the Adzem first came to him, he thought he was losing his mind. Because he lived alone, and had few friends, his instinct was to hide his condition, rather than run for help. He managed to call in sick that day, and lay in bed for a week – he must have eaten at some point, but he didn't remember it – watching pictures projected by them into his brain, learning the contours of another green world, with a sulfurous yellow sky. And then, at the end of the week, they left him. Something seemed to crawl out of his head.

When he regained his sense of place and time, the digital counter on his telephone still glowed a red zero. No one had called. As far the people at work knew, Ben was sick, he'd called in for the week, and they'd made do. They had learned to leave him alone on the rare occasions when he was unable or unwilling to work, because for the better part of ten years he had reported faithfully and uncomplainingly to his dull desk job.

The only thing different about his apartment from the week before had been a little anole reptile, rare this far north, that he found shaded by the chunk of rose quartz in his windowsill cactus garden. He understood, as the Adzem had instructed him during that week, that he would need to safeguard this animal until they were ready.

"You puttin' on some weight there, Ben," said Lucky, the easy going, Jamaican cashier at Steinman's. Ben dug through his pocket for exact change.

Gloria, the serious-minded, midwestern cashier, snapped at her across the magazine rack. "Lucky! Don't say that! You want Ben to go and shop at the Safeway?"

Lucky slid a loaf of bread carelessly across the scanner, and though it failed to register the UPC label, she let it pass into the bagging area. She made that mistake about once every other order, and Ben could never tell if it was intentional, just another aspect of her laid-back personality, or both. He knew she hated the automated cash register system, but he also knew she was loyal to the old Jewish butcher and his manager brother that had employed her for nearly twenty years. It was just the way things were done around here. Lucky let loaves of bread slide by, and maybe Joe Steinman made up for it once in a while with a big thumb on that old spring-weighted meat scale. The books balanced each month, the Steinmans did well enough to send their kids to out of town colleges, and Gloria and Lucky scraped by. It made Ben feel human. If he could feel human all the time, he might forget the Adzem.

Ben gathered in his change from Lucky and pocketed it without counting it. He figured the change all evened out in the long run too.

"Paper or plastic?" Lucky asked. Ben began to answer automatically, "P–" then stopped short and reflected Lucky's 'Gottcha!' grin back at her. No such choice at Steinman's. As Lucky slowly bagged his groceries in the same two-ply brown paper bags Steinman's had been using for the last forty years, Ben flipped through the morning paper. As he scanned an article about recombinant DNA, sirens whined softly in the distance.

Jane told people she'd gone to the University of Michigan, but she hadn't. On job applications where a college education was not necessary, she omitted that lie, and listed her schooling as Central Valley High School in Yuma, Colorado. Had the potential employers checked – which

none of them ever did – they would have discovered not only no high school by that name, but no valley. Jane was no criminal, but she was on the lam from her past, an abused and colorless childhood that had greyed her hair and etched her face well past its twenty-four years.

Jane mistakenly considered Ben her one and only friend. Because she lived in Ben's building, the Adzem found her a convenient place to work from and wait in. Ben had introduced the Adzem to Jane after they had been in Morgan, a former coworker of Ben, now institutionalized, and Betsy, a street person, now deceased. Ben didn't much like Jane, so when the transfer of Adzem consciousness from the lizard to Jane was over, his regret was minimal.

Jane, like the others, now had trouble coping with the rare moments when the Adzem relaxed their grip on her mind and the sensual immersion in an unpeopled, alien landscape blanked out. She'd pace around her tiny two room apartment, chain smoking, afraid to tell anyone about the visions except sometimes Ben. The old world grew increasingly false and frightening with each return. Fortunately, the maddening wait would end after a few hours and she could go back to the good place.

This time, though, it had been nearly four days. And this time, she became convinced that Adzemas was her real home, that she was a bodiless spirit who would float there in eternal peace, except that she was periodically punished for some sin by being forced to inhabit a primitive flesh creature in some kind of prison hell. She hadn't eaten for the entire four days, though one thing she normally did when back here was eat. She had not slept. She'd smoked two cartons of cigarettes. And she was now convinced that she would never be allowed to return so long as the body into which she'd been projected lived.

"I ain't seen you with that girl lately," Lucky said, setting a bottle of grapefruit juice on top of the bread. Gloria glared at her.

"I know," said Ben. He set the newspaper back on the rack. "She's not around much anymore."

"What's her name again?" Lucky persisted.

"Jane."

"Oh yeah, Jane. That's right."

Ben hoisted one paper sack into his left arm and Lucky helped him lift the other to his right. The sirens from the street grew louder, a mixture of fire, police, and ambulance. They seemed to be coming from several directions.

Ben, opened to a sudden telepathic message from the Adzem, saw the past five minutes inside his building replay in compressed time: Jane in the basement, pouring gasoline on a pile of firewood stacked high in a corner and lighting it. Jane lying on the floor in her apartment, as smoke leaks in through the floorboards and up along the radiator pipes. The brown anole crawling out of hiding, then scurrying up onto her face and latching onto her forehead, where it begins to redden, breathing and throbbing a blood red, its toes kneeding her skin as it takes back the impulses of Adzem consciousnesses. The anole then scurrying off into a crack in the floorboard. The room oxygen flashing over and the Jane body, motionless, consumed in fire.

As Ben reached the exit he saw through the glass that firetrucks were stopping at the end of the block. He could see flames shooting out the lower windows of his apartment building. A voice spoke in his head: *Save it.* The bags slipped out of his arms and groceries burst out onto the floor. Lucky gasped at the sound of shattering glass. Ben rushed through the door. Gloria ran out to watch. Lucky started methodically picking out the undamaged groceries from the ruined ones, and set them on the third, rarely used checkout counter, so Ben could retrieve them later. She called for a stock worker to mop up.

A police car blocked the intersection in front of Steinman's corner store. At the other end of the street, a firetruck was pulling around the corner to a hydrant, while firefighters from the first truck on the scene pumped water in a huge arc into Jane's kitchen window. Flames shot through the roof of the almost totally engulfed building.

The emergency workers were too startled to stop Ben as he ran by them and bounded up the stairs into the hot smoke. He passed his own second story apartment, fumbling for the covertly duplicated key to Jane's place on the floor above. He scrambled up the last flight of stairs into thicker smoke. He unlocked her door, shakily, and began crawling along the floor, down which ran little rivulets of firehose water as it emptied from the street-facing room. He choked on a caustic mixture of smoke and steam.

The door to her bedroom was closed. He touched it with the back of his hand and it was scalding. Leaning back on his hands he braced himself against an opposing doorjamb and kicked the door open. Flames shot out and singed his hair and eyebrows off. Through the wall of heat he could see a charred corpse, and paralysis seized him. His body wisely refused to move into the deadly room, until he was again shown a mental picture of the anole crawling under the floor board. Half the floor was already burned through, but he started crawling into the room anyway.

Two firemen came crawling after him into the apartment. Ben felt his knees and palms burning on the bedroom floor and fell reflexively back into the hallway. It was suddenly impossible to see anything – the smoke and steam were too heavy. He gasped a huge gulp of air, like a man about to plunge into water. Then the lead fireman reached out and dragged him from the apartment.

He remembered strangely masked faces and oxygen-tanked backs and a feeling of bouncing like they were running him down the stairs. Then he was dreaming, a horrible scenario of disaster and pain, mixed in with the cool, desert night of Adzemas in an impossible, contradictory reality. He knew it was a dream, and he knew that he'd awaken in one of the worlds. And then he did wake, bitterly disappointed and in pain, in a hospital bed.

Ben checked out of the hospital two days later. No one had visited him. The only place he could stay now was Richard's loft. Richard did not live in a way to which Ben was accustomed. A nightclub owner, Richard had dozens of friends, acquaintances, mystery business partners, understudies, and all of the above prefaced by "former", yet who still seemed to come around, or to call. Mostly call, apparently, as almost anytime you knocked on Richard's (open) door (and then let yourself in), you'd find him pacing the barely furnished, wall-to-wall carpeted living room talking into his cordless phone. Ben had seen him do this, call after call, for hours at a time. Ben read most of several books watching Richard pace, tuning him out for the most part, but occasionally picking up on some

fantastic new plans being laid – a documentary film on the mothers of serial killers, a lunch with the punked-out daughter of the president of Japan's biggest steel company, a woman (or possibly a transvestite – Ben hadn't absorbed all of this conversation) threatening him with legal action over something having to do with Richard's disruption of her "performance art". By the end of that conversation, she had settled for an apology and a fifth of Polish vodka.

And yet Richard was Ben's only true friend. Though he was intensely social, he communicated very personally. And Ben could be almost anonymous around Richard, at his club especially, but even in his home, through which numerous persons paraded every day. At either place you could be politely ignored, sit in a corner, have beer and food, and wait.

Before he went to Richard's, he walked back to the burned-out apartment building. He moved slowly, wearing protective hospital scrubs under his pants and coat, and keeping his gauze-wrapped arms close by his body. The outer walls of the building were still standing. As Ben arrived, an empty dumptruck, towing a rusty yellow bulldozer, pulled up and parked in front. Ben watched cautiously from across the street, but the workmen stepped off the truck and immediately crossed over to his side and went into the bar and grill for lunch. Ben crossed the street the other way. The big dumptruck obstructed the view between the bar and the front door of the building. Ben darted up the stairs he'd last seen from semi-consciousness, upside down, draped over a fireman's shoulder. The stairway and parts of rooms on the second and third floors still clung to unsound beams and brick.

It was Jane's third story flat he was going to, and in her bedroom, under the floorboard, he found it, still there. He picked up the anole and stroked it. Brown now, like the dusty wood, it seemed not to be breathing, and nothing moved save its big eyelids blinking down over green orbs. It seemed okay. He held it up in his palm and tried looking right into its eyes. It just sat there. Externally at least, it was a dumb lizard – what did he expect? He dropped it into his shirt pocket, buttoned it closed, and descended the stairs carefully.

By the time he reached the charred ground, the workmen, having only bought soft drinks, were stepping back onto the property. "Hey!" one of them yelled, but Ben turned the corner.

He took the little lizard back to Richard's. Richard was there, on the phone as usual. He spoke in his customary hushed tones, mystifying the conversation for his newest dressed-in-black girlfriend, who pretended not to listen, leafing through the pages of a music fanzine.

"I need a quarter. You got any?" Richard was saying as Ben walked by.

Drugs, as usual, Ben thought.

Ben sat down in an easy chair across from the girlfriend. She seemed not to notice him, keeping her eyes fixed on the magazine. Ben closed his eyes. The only sounds were the occasional swishing by of a car on the rainy street, and the soft mumblings of Richard, now on a new call. After a long while, Ben opened his eyes. The girlfriend was staring at the lizard, which had crawled out of Ben's pocket and was resting on his chest, pale green against the pale green of the hospital scrubs.

"What's its name?" she asked.

"I dunno," said Ben.

"It has to have a name."

"Okay, how about Adam?"

The girlfriend snorted. "That's a pretty dumb name for a lizard."

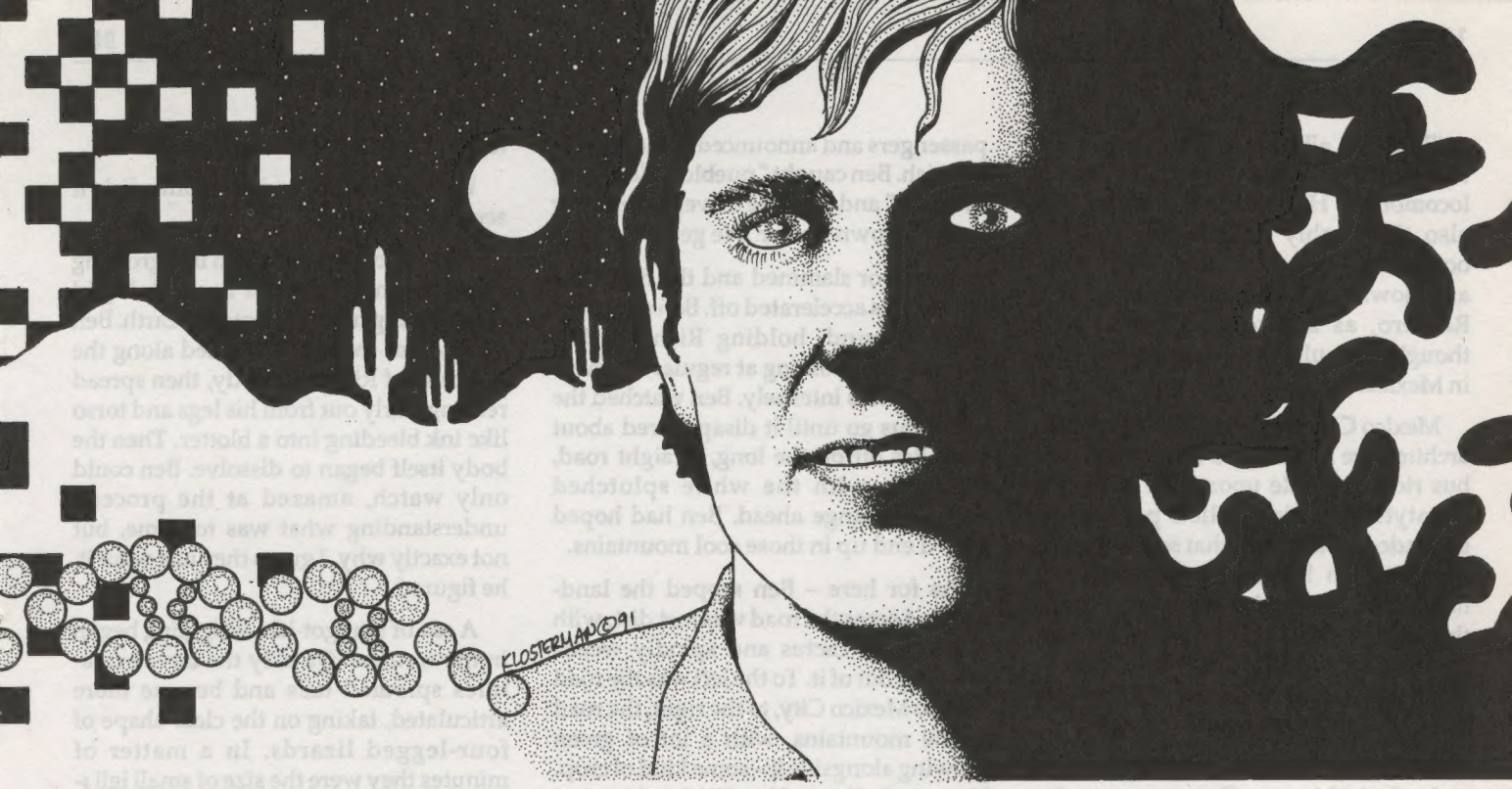
"Oh, well," answered Ben. "It just popped into my head." He smiled to himself. The girlfriend, unamused, went back to her magazine.

"Ben, what's shakin' dude?" Richard chuckled, rubbing him on the head and messing his hair.

"Not much, Sean Penn." Ben covered the lizard with his hand.

Richard rubbed his left ear, which was red from the telephone. "I hear you had a close call. I woulda come to see you in the hospital, only –"

The phone rang again, and without excusing himself Richard punched the button and launched into a new conversation.



Ben palmed the anole and went into a guest bedroom, where he carefully placed the animal in the back of the closet. "Find someone quick," Ben said to it. "You're liable to get squashed around here." He had no idea on what level it comprehended him, and in any case felt certain he didn't need to assist it in its operations. Communication with the Adzem had always been one way, even when they were inside him.

As he left the apartment, he walked past Richard, who had actually gotten off the phone and was putting some music on. "I'm going for a walk. Gotta get some clothes. It all burned up."

Ben walked around the neighborhood for an hour. There was a dark corner grocery, with crowded shelves. Three blocks away was a Salvation Army store, where he stocked up. There was a laundromat directly across the street from Richard's building. It was going to be easy to live here. Lots of empty and demolished lots, too – places he could think in.

When Ben returned to Richard's apartment, the phone was ringing, but no one was coming for it. Either Richard had gone to buy smokes, or what Ben suspected might happen had happened. He sighted a black-shoed foot pointing at the ceiling, just inside the guest room.

Ben looked quickly over at the couch to see if the girlfriend was still there. She wasn't, so he called out, "Anybody home? Hello?" When no one answered, he locked the door. The Adzem always knew not to make their move when other people were around.

He went to Richard's prone form and kneeled beside it. Richard was on his back, arms folded across his chest like a man in a coffin, but with eyes calmly open, blinking regularly. Instead of pressing itself to his forehead like it had done with the others, this time the reptile had crawled half its body into Richard's mouth. Its long brown tail swished across his chin once, and it slipped in all the way. Richard swallowed.

Ben shuddered. He was sorry it had chosen Richard, rather than one of the people that hung out here, for now he had no one left on earth he could talk with or trust. But the sense of mission instilled in him by the Adzem made such personal concerns seem trivial. Richard's body was synonymous with that mission now. And Ben sensed that Richard might be the last carrier he'd have to watch over. The direct entry of the lizard into Richard's body signalled a major change in the way the Adzem would now operate. Maybe Richard would take over for him as their caretaker. He wondered if Richard would tell him about his visions, as Jane had.

Richard looked up at Ben. He was taking it well. Except for showing a faint question across his brow, Richard looked almost pleased. This cheered Ben, who always felt mixed emotions about the transformation. Soon, millions of Adzem minds would move around on the atomic circuitry of Richard's nerves. And as they did so, the essence of Richard would expire in equal measure.

Ben helped Richard to a sitting position against his bedframe. He had already forgotten the lizard, Ben knew, and though Richard would not remember, Ben told him, "I'll take care of you. I'll always be here taking care of you." Richard smiled, the question on his face disappeared, and he slipped into a light coma. "Only I'm lying, Richard," Ben said to the oblivious body. "I can't protect you."

Ben heard voices. His eyes glazed over, his mouth hung open, and he concentrated on the communication. *This human body will be different from the others,* it was telling him. *This human body is not a resting place, or a place of study. This human body will take us to the desert.* You *will take this body to the desert.*

The next day Ben drove to the airport and, using two hundred dollars from Richard's wallet and the rest of his own checking account, purchased two one-way plane tickets to Mexico, and exchanged the rest of their cash for pesos. He led Richard gingerly along the folding hallway into the plane. Richard needed to be regularly reminded how to walk. And though he was generally comprehensible in his speech, he frequently spoke in non-sequiturs now. He greeted the flight attendant in front of the cockpit with a bubbly, "Hello, Mother!" The Adzem process of reading and building onto his cerebral processes was not perfectly localized, and stray firings were

spilling into all sorts of other areas, distorting everything from socialization to locomotion. His personal identity was also thoroughly disturbed – he only occasionally recognized himself as 'Richard' now. Ben had taken to calling him Romero, as a joke, and because he thought it would be a good name for him in Mexico.

Mexico City was just a blur of colonial architecture and soot to Ben, and on the bus ride out, mile upon mile of almost shantytown living rolled past, backgrounded by industry that seemed particularly alien here, pounded into this highland plain under blue. Only when they'd left behind them the city, the destitute suburbs, and a hundred miles or so of road, did Ben relax into the rhythm and space of the Mexican landscape.

Suddenly Richard began to seize violently in his seat. Passengers on the bus turned around when they heard his moaning and thrashing. Ben did his best to restrain him, but Richard slammed his head into the metal seat frame in front of them and started bleeding. The man in the seat across the aisle said something in Spanish that Ben didn't understand. Ben glanced at him dumbly and then looked back to Richard. Blood was all over his white shirtfront. Ben ripped off his shirttail and pressed it firmly against the gash in Richard's head while Richard continued to buck in his seat.

The man across the aisle poked Ben's shoulder, and gestured to Ben to push something into Richard's mouth. He pulled on his tongue and mimicked biting it, shook his head no, then placed his own wallet into his mouth and bit down on it. Ben waved him off, but tightened his grip on Richard to hold him still. Richard was arching his back, as though trying to lift himself to a standing position.

By now the bus had stopped. Before the driver and others could come to help them, Richard's body lurched forward into the aisle, and it was all Ben could do to hold on to Richard's body as it stumbled involuntarily toward the door. The driver opened it and they made it down the stairs somehow.

The driver turned to the alarmed passengers and announced something in Spanish. Ben caught "pueblo ... delante ... ayuda ..." and then the driver called after him, "In town doctor. We get."

The door slammed and the first class cruiser bus accelerated off. Ben sat on the dusty ground, holding Richard. The spasms were coming at regular intervals now, but less intensely. Ben watched the white bus go until it disappeared about six miles off on the long, straight road, blending with the white splotched mountain range ahead. Ben had hoped they'd end up in those cool mountains.

As for here – Ben scoped the landscape. Across the road was just dirt, with a few stray cactus and spindly weeds growing out of it. To the left was the road back to Mexico City, to the right, the road to the mountains, with a lot of green growing alongside it – some kind of crop. He swiveled himself and Richard around in the dry dirt to see how far toward them the crop ran. Right behind them was a field of cactus, which started about a mile back down the road from Mexico City. In the bus, he'd been too preoccupied with Richard to notice the apppearance on the scene of this unusual crop – huge prickly pear cactus, planted in neat rows like corn, for almost as far as he could see to the south and east. Thousands of acres, miles of it.

Richard's body lurched forward again and he fell headlong between two rows. His face hit the sand hard. Ben thought about rolling him over, but before he could move he got the vision he'd been waiting for – the first one since Richard's apartment.

He saw the million cactus all suddenly change form. Still green, but now needles on top turning to two eyes, and the bottoms narrowing to thin bodies with long tails. A field of lizards to the horizon, millions of them.

"Here?" Richard asked out loud, surprised. "Now?"

Yes, came the reply, so emphatically and clearly that it seemed to be spoken aloud, right next to him, or from the sky, rather than from inside his head, which is where he knew it really was.

From inside Richard, he reminded himself, and transmitted to my head.

Watch, the voice added – with relish, it seemed to Ben.

The soil began to darken in a growing circle around Richard's head. A liquid was pouring from him into the earth. Ben watched as the wetness raced along the contours of Richard's body, then spread rectangularly out from his legs and torso like ink bleeding into a blotter. Then the body itself began to dissolve. Ben could only watch, amazed at the process, understanding what was to come, but not exactly why. I guess they just want it, he figured.

A sea of maggot-like wriggling began in the wetness. Quickly the larvae creatures sprouted tails and became more articulated, taking on the clear shape of four-legged lizards. In a matter of minutes they were the size of small iguanas, and a liquid began to arc out of their mouths, which they opened to the sky. Their bodies did not dissolve as Richard's had – they simply spewed out the liquid onto the ground for a moment, then ran off in all directions, radiating out into the cactus field, along the road, and across the road into the unplanted desert field there. They kept growing as they ran. More larvae began to wiggle in the patches of liquid that the lizards vomited. A car rushed past, crushing a hundred lizards in a twenty meter stretch of road, and instantly the white wriggling began in the road kills. In a matter of seconds, thousands more tiny lizards scattered from that spot on the road.

Ben sat in the dirt, as hundreds of tiny new creatures ran close past him and over him. The first born, which Ben could see lumbering away in the distance, were now the size of alligators, but with flipper-like buds growing alongside their forlegs. Now Ben saw dragons rise up off the desert floor. First just a few, then in flocks, like ducks flushed from a swamp, they became so numerous that they dimmed the sun, and their beating wings became a roar.

A car crept by, the driver afraid to move too fast on a road filled with eight foot Komodo Monitors. Ben ran up to it and pulled the driver's door open. The little boy and girl in the back seat were

hysterical, and their mother, herself on the verge of screaming, reached back to try and calm them.

"¡Los comprendo! ¡Es importante!" shouted Ben over the din of scrambling and flying animals. The flight of nearby dragons was also causing a tremendous wind and dust storm. "¡Yo los comprendo, estes animales!" he yelled.

Perhaps out of desperation, the father slid over and let Ben climb in. Ben hit the accelerator hard, also perhaps out of desperation. He struck a few lizards, and the old Plymouth almost skidded off the road – the children shrieking – as they deflected off a Komodo with nearly full, flapping wings. But the creatures down the road began to scatter and lift off, and soon Ben was speeding along. They approached a small cluster of buildings at the intersection of another rural route.

The father pointed. "Acá." Ben pulled the car off the road into the gravel lot in front of a small cafe and fruitstand. The family ran inside.

They were out of range of the ground lizards, but dragons continued to fly over by the hundreds. Looking back toward the cactus fields, they could see a huge black swarming, a living cloud, from which thousands and thousands of monsters diffused out across the sky.

The store owners stood in front of their building, watching the spectacle. They seemed more amazed than afraid. The sky behind the mountains began to glow red, as the village on the other side burned where the first of the dragons had learned fire. With this last physical hurdle passed, and cognition and memory triggered, the dragons remembered who they were and why they'd come. As they flew, they spewed their white, wriggling spawn onto the earth, and fire onto the man-made structures.

To the woman shopkeeper, who had darker skin than her husband, Ben said, "I'm sorry about the groceries, Lucky. I hope it wasn't too much of a mess." Their invasion launched, the Adzem had no more need for Ben and had released his mind – released it not only from them, but from its own conscious control.

To the shopkeeper, Ben said, "Es el fin del mundo, señor, sí. Pero un día nuevo para el planeta." The shopkeeper nodded, neither no nor yes, thinking, Loco.

"There's one vision I had all by myself," Ben shouted to no one. "They showed me the end, how they take it over. That was them. But this place, this valley, that was me. I chose this place, not them. It's mine. They can have the rest, but this is mine." He spoke again to the woman. "Tell them this. Tell them that the lizards will take over everything, burn it all down, but they forgot about right here, the source, where they're too little to breathe fire. This little valley will be where the resistance starts. This is where people will survive. Tell them." She looked to her husband nervously.

Ben jumped in front of her suddenly. "Stand behind me," he said to her. "We've got to clear the slate. Me and you, we'll start it over. We don't need them." He pointed hostilely at the husband, and at the family huddling for shelter under the eaves of the fruit stand.

The woman tried to run to her husband, but Ben held her back. The shopkeeper rushed at Ben, who kicked him and pushed him down. Ben grabbed a shovel that was leaning against a beam and began swinging it wildly. The shopkeeper got up and ran into the cafe.

"Coward, ha!" Ben shrieked, his eyes bulging. "Too weak. Only I –" His voice choked out. The storekeeper now stood in front of him with a shotgun.

"Está loco," he shouted to his wife over the din of the low flying airforce of dragon invaders, and cocked the rifle. With Ben momentarily distracted, the woman ran behind her husband, whose eyes, and the gun, remained fixed on Ben. He stood squarely and motionlessly, his face hard. Ben roared out and raised the shovel over his head, charging. The man fired. Both barrels blasted Ben into a heap of death.

The shopkeeper went inside the cafe. With the help of the family, he began to gather together provisions. Outside, the dust continued to whirl in the roar of the dragons' wings, but the dragons flew by, many of them at great altitudes, as if setting off on long flights. They seemed uninterested in the valley. Still, if they had to, the shopkeeper and his wife, and the family, could live in the caves in the mountains. There'd be water there, and they had plenty of food. For now, they'd just stay here and hope everything would be alright.

The shopkeeper's wife went into the fruitstand attached to the cafe. She too gathered food, putting apples and potatoes into a large sack. She walked to the back, to a big steel sink where they washed some of their produce shipments. Lying in a shallow puddle of water at the bottom was a small green snake. It was curled in a circle, head to tail, ringing the drain. The woman reached in and placed her fingertips lightly on the serpent's head. She closed her eyes.

She saw a hundred million snakes rise like stalks out of the ground, flop to earth, and begin slithering toward water. She saw them plunging into the ocean, into lakes, ponds, and mud holes in the desert floor. Then she saw huge sea serpents shoot out of the water into the sky, unfolding wet new wings and catching the winds. She saw them begin to do battle with the dragons – or were they joining with the dragons to do battle against the armies of men? It was not clear. She wasn't sure there were people there at all. The planet in this vision barely resembled earth, with smokey yellow skies and burned out forests and cities smothered in furious tropical growth.

Soon, it would all happen. It was as inevitable as the sunrise. She felt freed of a huge burden. The earth had never belonged to human beings – they came from it and returned to it, but it was never theirs. *Es nuestra, la tierra – it's ours* – the alien mind told her.

She felt suddenly overwhelmed by tiredness and stumbled into the small room behind the shop. She unfolded one of the cots they kept there, lay down, and immediately fell into a deep sleep. The serpent crawled up a leg of the cot, across her face, and into her mouth. Acting much more quickly than the lizard had, it began to dissolve inside her. It would use her DNA to meet its accelerated physical demands, and to build mind centers. The woman's body rolled off the cot. In a matter of seconds, it liquified and soaked into the dirt floor. The earth beneath the two tiny shops began to rumble. ❑

David Hast's first published story was "Crime Watcher" in **BBR** #15. Since then he's placed stories with *Auguries, Figment, Ellipsis* ... and *Boing-Boing*, as well as the next *Writers of the Future* anthology. "Crime Watcher" has also been chosen to appear in the forthcoming *Pseudo-Nymph Project*.

Notes for LUCHENKO'S THIRD SYMPHONY *(The Arcades of Allah)*

RICHARD KADREY

In the broiling summer of 1997, a battered long-duration space transport came to rest on the dusty plains of Hovsgol Nuruu, in the Russian zone of northern Mongolia. In the control bay of the ship was found the body of Colonel Vasily Borgov Luchenko. For months, Luchenko's ship had been considered lost beyond the Asteroid Belt that separates the Earth from Mars and the outer planets. Unbeknownst to the rest of the world, however, Russian ground crews had begun receiving signals from the lost ship a mere forty-eight hours before it made a computer-controlled emergency landing.

When the ship was down, it was plain to all that the transport had suffered great damage to both its navigational and life support systems. When Luchenko was removed from the craft, his body temperature was below 80 degrees Fahrenheit. Fortunately, members of the medical trauma team that had treated the victims of the Stoli space station disaster were present. They succeeded in raising Luchenko's body temperature sufficiently to fly him safely back to the Laev Hospital in Moscow.

By the end of the week, Colonel Luchenko was pronounced out-of-danger. Six weeks later at a press conference carried live on television and radio, Luchenko first spoke publicly of his encounter with the extraterrestrials he called the Julia Set. In March of the following year, Luchenko's First Symphony (*Songbird in the Abyss*) premiered to enthusiastic reviews in Paris. It was not until his Third Symphony, however, that Luchenko dealt so directly with his strange adventure.

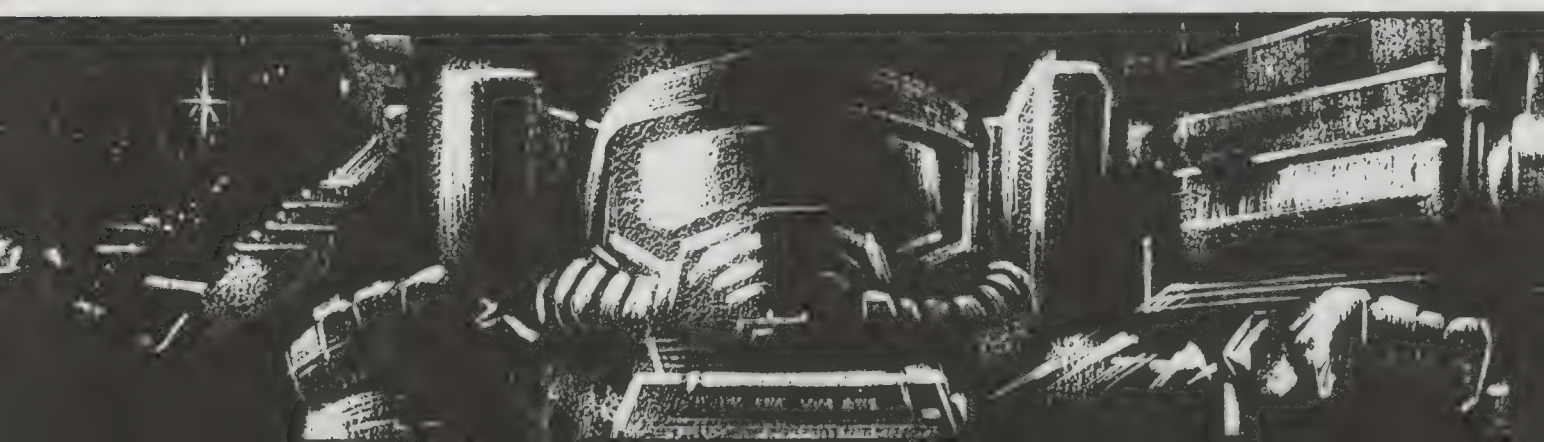
Vasily Borgov Luchenko, failed music student, minor poet with a handful of academic publications, was not a man that many would have guessed could inspire such worldwide devotion as now exists. After his dismissal from the state music academy in Leningrad, he was forced to work as an unskilled labourer, cleaning the enormous fish tanks at the Novosk aqua farms. His devotion to music was clear even then, however, as he somehow completed the libretto for the recently revived Faustian opera, *Stalin in the Wilderness*. His first completely original large-scale work, however, appeared under the most unusual of circumstances.

Among the patients at the Laev Hospital, was the Japanese pianist Shigeo Yomiuri, an important figure in the first generation of so-called Silicon Treasures, youths whose natural artistic skills were theoretically augmented by the use of intramuscular nanomachines and cerebral computer implants. Yomiuri, it turned out, was fascinated by astronomy and had been an avid follower of both the Russian and European space programs. Luchenko confessed his interest in music and asked if he might play for Yomiuri a piece he had been thinking about for some time. He performed the piece on a World War Two-vintage upright piano in the tiny chapel attached to the hospital. This was the starting point for Luchenko's Third Symphony, in which the piece now stands as the fourth canto (*Inter-death*). With Yomiuri's encouragement and promise to record the piece, Luchenko soon developed a plan for a piano suite inspired by his visit to the Julia Set.

Yomiuri premiered *Inter-death* in Amsterdam the following fall, but already Luchenko was on to bigger things. He realized almost immediately that he needed more room to tell the story of his involvement with space exploration. He put aside *Inter-death* and began writing what became his First Symphony, which told of his aborted flight to Mars, and his lonely time in space before meeting the Set. He first performed a piano version of the symphony in front of two hundred patients while still in the hospital. The audience included hospital cooks and maintenance workers as well as doctors, members of the music academy faculty, and clergymen. Prepared by Luchenko's comments, they proved extremely receptive, and Luchenko himself later wrote that he had never felt greater joy, attention and better understanding of his art.

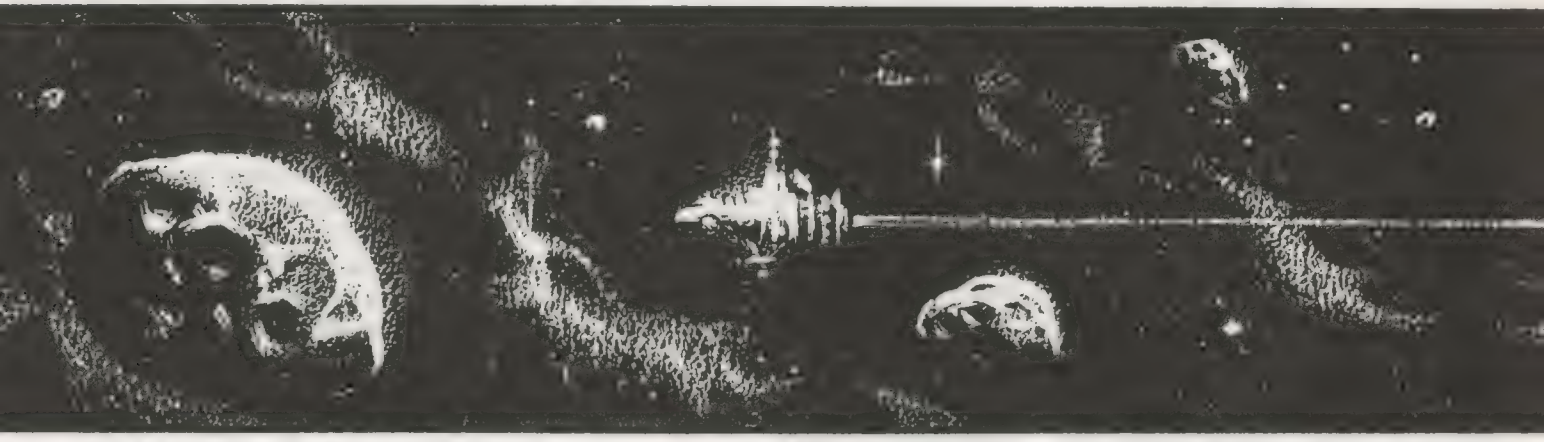
Following his release from Laev, Luchenko began work on a concert version of the piece for full orchestra. Following the First Symphony's successful premier in late 1998 (with Shigeo Yomiuri performing the piano and organ parts), Luchenko retired to the French countryside to begin work on his Second Symphony (*The Iteration of Shiva*). This work, though somewhat less well-received than the First, recounts Luchenko's early years as a poetry and piano student, the influence his father (a decorated veteran of the Afghani Wars) had on Luchenko's decision to join the military, and his own eventual entry into the cosmonaut program. What makes the Second Symphony notable is that for the first time, Luchenko combined his own music with his poetry, displayed a surprising lyric maturity as he wove a text from many of the world's greatest religions together with ruminations on chaos theory and theoretical physics.

Luchenko's whole artistic output was based on deep spiritual roots growing out of an early disaffection from the Catholic church and an interest in Eastern spiritual practices. Mixed with his strong grounding in science (at his father's insistence), these practices produced for him both a musical and a belief system that he likened to space exploration. He always insisted that he was not a *mystic*, but simply a *cosmonaut of music*, whose task consisted in the tonal exploration of the universe. The texts sung by the chorus in his Second and Third Symphonies, often misunderstood and sometimes bitterly attacked, aim at nothing more than a complete explication of this vision. Indeed, it was the scientific rigor that he brought to his work that attracted so many followers, culminating finally in



the quasi-religious White Arcades movement, before their tragic involvement in right-wing Japanese politics.

In Luchenko's only published book of poetry, *Conditions and Singularities* (Shambhalla Books, 2001), many ideas important to understanding the Third Symphony are to be found. The image of white "arches" (which gave the White Arcadists their name) recurs throughout. In his introduction to the book, Luchenko spoke of the Muslim prophet Mohammed's hearing the word of God in the desert, and likened this to his own time with the Julia Set, although he then went on to explain that he had received no "revelations" from the aliens in the biblical sense, and that his communication with the Set was limited. Indeed, the differences in their modes of thought were so profound that he likened the experience to being "locked for months in a room with a lobster and trying to establish a dialog."



But the idea of the chaotic mutability of Space and Time (and presumably the Afterlife), the actual subject of the Third Symphony, came to him while he was with the Set. After Luchenko's return to Earth, his whole artistic output was an attempt to reach a new relationship between chaos theory and music, a relationship, in some ways, much closer to computer programming than to traditional compositional techniques. His use of melody "iteration", the almost infinite expansion of a theme by the application of simple mathematical formulas, was related to Indian music, the Minimalist movement, and the science of fractal geometry. Indeed, the idea of fractals was central to the Third Symphony, both in the sung texts and in the music. The name Luchenko used to describe the aliens, the Julia Set, referred to drawings and equations produced by two French mathematicians during World War One that were considered to be the first primitive expression of what later came to be called the Mandelbrot Set; Luchenko's extraterrestrials apparently resembled certain fractal shapes, and, Luchenko implied, may have even been "living" fractals. The glyphs in the white arcades were fractals, receding infinitely into the arches on which they were "carved". But it was in the final movement of the symphony that Luchenko made his ultimate statement on Chaos as he tested the bounds of tonality and rhythm to create a musical equivalent of the Set's vehicle, which he described as not as a ship in the ordinary sense, but as a "consciously-directable singularity" and a "theological equation".

The Third Symphony is large, and not divided into traditional movements since Luchenko wanted to leave room for the piece to expand and contract differently with each performance, and because he did not believe that one could properly break the "turbulent" structure of his music into smaller parts. Nevertheless, in his conductor's notes he described the piece as having eight "cantos." Here are the composer's own words on his music:

Canto 1: *Prayer of Fire*

Five in the morning, the ship leaves the launch pad; a solo soprano sings of flight, her voice surrounded by the buzzing of the orchestra which are other voices, a fog of prayers, doubts, fears, the commands of the mission controllers, and the international telecommunications web fed by all the world's antennae, a metal forest of infinite complexity. Extend this to the spiritual level and you find the voice of God as it is embedded in the phrase "Allah akbar" and the coordinates of a Lorenz Attractor.

Canto 2: *Color is a degree of darkness allied to Shadow*

Goethe's famous quote. Light (color) is the language of fractal time, of angels. The brass conjure the overwhelming, burning light that is the ship moving upwards through the atmosphere, then the pointillism of star shine. Later, the theme is iterated to indicate the flickering lights on the consoles of the malfunctioning computers. The piano softly plays the first version of the Chaos theme, as the ship enters into the maelstrom of the Asteroid Belt. The Gamelan section for percussion and strings is the sound of broken heat shields striking the hull of the ship.

Canto 3: *A Newtonian Nightmare*

For chorus alone. Trapped in Time, moving exhausted through empty space. Different sections of the chorus begin and end at will, in opposition to Newtonian math. They sing religious texts relating to fear and enlightenment. Jesus in the wilderness. Buddha under the Bo tree. Mohammed receiving the words of Allah.

Canto 4: *Inter-death*

Piano overlaps with the dwindling voices of singers. This is the zone of no hope. Iteration of the Gamelan section, as the ship is further damaged by asteroid fragments. Breakdown of the ship's recyclers. The cosmonaut's bodily waste trails from the recycling units, like the fringed edges of a Mandelbrot Set.

Canto 5: *The Abyss is the Infinite Mosque*

The mosque is the singularity inhabited by the Julia Set. A long and infinitely slow string figure is contrasted by a scherzo for brass and winds which describes the fractal light through which lie the white arcades. The orchestra plays in a mode based on north African scales; a male tenor enacts the call of the *muezzin*, while the percussion keeps the fractal pulse: X-X2.

Canto 6: *Light is the Language of Shadow*

Look at something impossible, like the face of God. A creature that lives in Time and three dimensions suddenly encounters fractional time and space. Words no longer function; the chorus sings vowels, syllables, almost making words, but never completing them. Stare into the carving in the white arcades. They are like a Menger sponge, an artifact with an infinite surface area, yet zero volume. Stare hard enough, you seem to merge with the arcades, and are shot headlong down rivers of pure chaos. Is this the language of the Set or the voice of God in the desert?

Canto 7: *Escape Time Algorithm*

This carries echoes of the first, second, and sixth cantos. Back inside the Asteroid Belt, but outside it at the same time. *The iteration of identity.* Look through the glyphs on the white arcades and watch the ship return to earth. Look at the ship's screens and see the arcades grow distant. On the ship, the cosmonaut dreams of familiar colors and shapes, of melodies hidden in light. Soon the voices begin – voices from earth. The cosmonaut cannot answer. The chorus is echoed by the orchestra as the cosmonaut in the ship sings to the cosmonaut in the arcades, who sings back to the other on his way to Earth.

Canto 8: *Hymn of Turbulence*

The whole orchestra here, fading to a violin/piano duet, expanding on the Chaos theme. Finally, only the piano is left, the iterations of melody have lead back to the original version of the Chaos theme. (The piece may end here or, if the orchestra is willing, it may continue from where the Chaos theme first appears at the end of Canto Two. This repetition can be continued indefinitely; the piece is, technically, endless.)

It is still difficult for many people to understand how a liberating (and apolitical) vision such as Luchenko's could have brought about such a tragic and abrupt end to his life and career. Even at this writing, the events surrounding his death remain obscure. We know that he was gunned down after the Tokyo premier of the Third Symphony. And it is believed that Shigeo Yomiuri, the Silicon Treasure and, by that time, high-ranking White Arcadist was the gunman. Yomiuri's jailhouse suicide has, unfortunately, further muddied the waters. Many questions remain unanswered: Did Yomiuri, in fact, kill Luchenko? And did he act alone? And if he did, what was his motive? Why destroy the prophet of his own growing religious movement? Could it have been Luchenko's opposition to the White Arcadists' political aspirations (based on a platform of New Age computer babble and Muslim Fundamentalism)? And what, if any, were Yomiuri's connections to the right-wing Iron Chrysanthemum movement in the Japanese military and their attempted *coup d'etat* in Tokyo?

Ironically, the one person who could probably answer all these questions is Luchenko himself, the part of him that he left behind with the Julia Set, staring joyfully into the glyphs on the white arcades. If his stories of travelling down rivers of chaos are true, he no doubt saw (and perhaps experienced) his own death many times. From our limited place in Time and Space, we may try to follow Luchenko's example and look at his death as simply another bend in a Koch curve. Many believers, in fact, do choose to see it that way, and it is to them that we dedicate this memorial album. ❑

Richard Kadrey is the author of the acclaimed novel *Metrophage*, as well as numerous short stories. A resident of California, he is a frequent contributor to *Science Fiction Eye*.

MOGOLLÓN NEWS

by **UNCLE RIVER**
Our New Mexico Correspondent

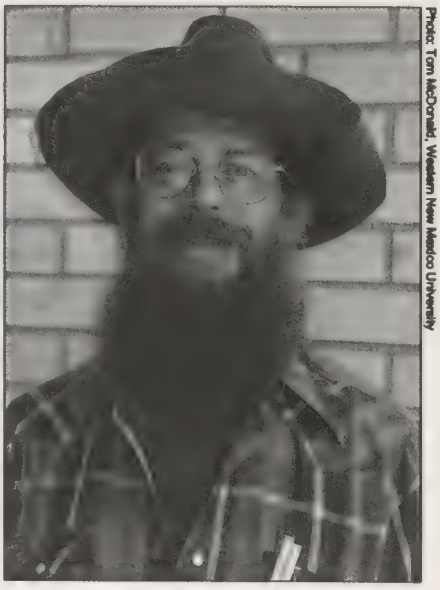


Photo: Tom McDonald, Western New Mexico University

Winter in Mogollón

It is winter in Mogollón. And in winter it becomes readily apparent why Mogollón is a ghost town.

At last measurement, the snow on the shady side of the street was eighteen feet deep. This measurement was taken by having Joe Malloney, who is six feet tall, stand with a surveyor's stick on his head. Unfortunately, he froze stiff. And while the local rescue crew was digging him out, the surveyor's stick got lost in the snow. It is probably deeper by now, though no further measurements have been attempted.

You will be relieved to learn, however, that Joe froze so quickly he didn't have time to suffocate. So he was carried down to the Bloated Goat where, with liberal ministrations by Drs Jim Beam and Jose Cuervo, he is recovering rapidly.

The Bloated Goat Saloon opened for business as usual at 10:00 am on the Monday after Thanksgiving. Whiskey is $6 a shot. Tourists are recommended to bring their own firearms as rentals go fast, especially when the weather keeps everyone in. A round on the house will be provided to anyone who brings up some new bar stools or tables, as there is a severe shortage of furniture since the big blizzard the week before Christmas.

On the sunny slope, in the meantime, daffodils and grape hyacinths are blooming again. And the first crop of salad greens is almost ready for harvest. Several attempts have been made to erect a greenhouse so tropical fruit could be grown. But falling boulders have always shattered the glass thus far.

The road is usually plowed after storms in time for the mail to come in. However, anyone wishing to visit Mogollón should be warned that it gets muddy on warm days. Four wheel drive is not advised as it only digs a hole faster. And the helicopter costs to pull out the extra weight are that much greater as well. In fact, one Jeep Cherokee disappeared altogether. The passengers only just managed to escape by smashing the windshield. And they all have required a very expensive course of therapy (which can usually be provided in the back room of the Bloated Goat).

Anyone wishing to visit Mogollón should be advised that the best time to arrive is between dawn and sunrise.

Accommodations are generally available without reservations if you don't mind sharing your quarters with the bears. However, there is no food service in town this winter. So you should bring plenty in case the weather closes in. Four thousand calories per person per day is usually adequate even when it is very cold. But bring extra as the bears will probably want a share. ✹

Ice

This winter, Joe Malloney decided to go into the ice business. He was well situated with the creek handy and some tanks on the shady side of the street. There was even an abandoned mine behind his house he could use for storage.

Ice looked like just the sort of business he could do pretty well in: Low capital investment – just a saw to cut it into hundred pound chunks. He welded up a set of ice tongs out of scrap.

Next summer he figured he'd put up a sign and sell his ice to the tourists going camping in the forest or fishing at Snow Lake.

It has been a mild winter, but that is still plenty cold enough up here in Mogollón to make ice. So Joe's been going great guns since November.

Elvira Sonderfeld doesn't get out a lot any more, but with spring on the air, she went for a walk one afternoon and happened on Joe. Though it was warm and bright in the sun, Joe's tanks in the shade were already cooling off. He was pouring in the water for another batch. Elvira, who remembers the old days, struck up a conversation with him about the ice business.

"Folks didn't have electric refrigerators back then. So this fellow used to drive into town with a wagon hollering, 'Ice! Ice for sale.'"

Joe smiled nostalgically.

Elvira looked around. "What are you doing for sawdust?"

"Sawdust?"

"Yes. Ol' 'Ice' packed his in sawdust. Helped it stay frozen. And kept the blocks from all sticking together."

Joe turned slightly green.

So, folks, next summer when Joe's sign goes up, have a little sympathy if the blocks come in funny sizes. There'll be a lot of crushed ice for sale too. It still won't have taken much capital. But it is going to be some of the most labour-intensive ice for the price. ✹

The Romanian Michael

DREAMS TO REMEMBER

All that day the train travelled at high speed westwards, through Roumania. It did not stop, but slackened speed slightly as it passed through the larger towns *en route*. Only the higher officials of the Roumanian main railway line knew of the passage of the special, heavily-screened train, its destination or its passengers. Towards midnight, the Yugoslav frontier lay only a few miles ahead. As the lights of Timisoara, capital city of Banat, the rich wheat province of Western Roumania, began to glow through the darkness, the driver sounded the engine whistle to warn the station of his approach. The train slowed down to pass through. Just as it left the station platform and was again gathering speed, sharp flashes and the staccato cracks of rifle fire burst from the thick undergrowth of the steep embankments by the side of the railway track. Bullets spattered sharply against the steel framework of the carriages and crackled against the reinforced glass of the windows. The driver quickly accelerated and the train shot forward at full speed towards Yugoslavia — and safety. The would-be assassins, it was discovered later, were members of the Iron Guard, the Fascist terrorists of Roumania who, at the behest of Adolf Hitler, had brought about the downfall of King Carol, brought his realm to ruin and degraded it to the level of a province of Nazi Germany.

King Carol, Hitler and Lupescu,
A.L. Easterman, 1942

MOURNING THE EXCESSIVE fantasies of an unhappy celibacy, Jerry Cornelius split with some feeling from the Carpathian convent where, for the past few years, he had been holing up. Life looked to him as if it might just be worth living again. Eastern Europe was perking with a vengeance. Though it had to be said, some people were already waving goodbye to their first flush of Ruritanian innocence.

"My view of the matter, Mr C, is that we should've nuked the bastards where it hurts." In middle age Shakey Mo Collier was growing to resemble the more disturbed aspects of Enoch Powell. His pedantry had a tenancy to increase as his enthusiasm faded, and Mo, Jerry thought, was nothing without his enthusiasms. He blew Mo a kiss for old time's sake and climbed into his coat-of-many-colours, his leather check. It still had the smell of a hundred ancient battles, most of them lost. "Down these mean malls a man must shop." He checked his credit the way he had once checked his heat. These were proving easy times for him. But he missed the resistance. Who had given him all this unearned power whilst he slept?

It was then that he realised he had dozed out a class war in which the class he had opposed, his adoptive own, had won back everything it had seemed to lose and now had no further ambition but to maintain its privileges with greater vigilance than last time. He was the unwilling beneficiary of this victory. He became confused, too sick to spend. He felt his old foxy instincts stirring. He grew wary. He grew shifty. He stepped back.

I'M STILL LEAVING YOU

What Jessica Douglas-Home observed as she touted the polling booths with her interpreter and driver was that only members of the Salvation Front were represented at the polling stations. Opposition members had everywhere been prevented from turning up. Opposition workers reported posters torn down and offices ransacked, even by the police. Opposition newspapers were mislaid or destroyed and despite a decree that campaigning must stop two days before the election, there was the last-minute distribution of a free newspaper publishing photo-

Question Moorcock

graphs of all the official candidates. "Every one from the Ceausescu era," says Jessica sadly. "Simply a game of musical chairs."

Sunday Telegraph, 27 May 1990

THE TIME MACHINE was a sphere of milky fluid attached to the front lamp-holder of a Raleigh 'Royal Albert' Police Bicycle of the old, sturdy type, before all the corruption had been made public. Jerry hated the look and feel of the thing, but he needed to take a quick refresher in 1956, to see if some of the associations made sense. At the moment, as he wiped the Bucharest dust from his handle-bars and checked his watches, he was downright terrified.

Was it just the threat of liberty which alarmed him, or was the world actually on the brink of unimaginable horror as, in his bones, he feared? He shuddered. Whatever they might say, he had never relished the worst. Especially when the best seemed so much more within his grasp.

Yet this was the dangerous time. It always was. "As power-holders lay down their arms, those who have known little power are quick to seek advantages." Prinz Lobkowitz bent to pump up the front tyre, his wispy grey hair falling over eyes in which humour sought to disguise the concern he felt. "And there is nothing to say they won't abuse that power as thoroughly as their predecessors down the centuries. It's the same in the Middle East. Most of these people have never experienced anything like the familiar democracy of the West. They have no faith in it. They have been supplied with myths which prove how degenerate and immoral it was. These are deeply conservative people. They worship their ignorance since that was all of their religion that was left to them. They defend their ignorance as others might defend a principle."

"Sometimes you don't sound a lot different from the party hacks." Jerry gave the front wheel an experimental bounce. "That's a lot better. Thanks."

Prinz Lobkowitz fitted the pump back on the frame. "They are all shades, I suppose."

Jerry got the bike into the proper rhythm and was gone before he could say goodbye. The pearly grey mist opened before him. It was good to be on the move again. He only hoped no-one had changed the old megaflow routes.

This would not be the best moment to be Lost in Time, though God knew, it looked as if the whole of England was now in that situation. He had never imagined a future as miserable as this. He had thought the Sex Pistols had meant something more than a trend in T-shirts. They had all been bought over by lifestyle magazines.

He gazed wonderingly back at this unbearable future and found himself suddenly in a coffee-bar in Soho talking to someone called Max, who waxed his moustache and wore a pointed beard, about Blind Jesse Fuller and Woody Guthrie. These were the years of private obsession, of small groups of enthusiasts never acknowledged by the common media, not even *Melody Maker* which was full of Duke Ellington and referred to Elvis only on the cartoon page. "This was before your enthusiasm became the common currency of the sixties," said a Shade, "and you thought you had achieved a better world. Then you sold it back to them for shares in Biba, Mary Quant and Ann Summers, just as they merged with the City."

"Humbug!" Jerry desperately attempted to disengage from a morality he thought he'd discarded years before. "I don't want any of this. Where's my mother?" She would understand. He had missed total immersion. When he was this aware of actuality, he tended to retreat in every complex way he knew. Time experienced at such relentlessly close quarters gave him the heeby-jeebies. He shivered. 1956 had been bad enough without this as well.

It was time to split again.

I AIN'T DRUNK

In the case of Roumania and King Carol, Goebbels had a superb opportunity to demonstrate his perverted talents. Ten years' experience as Hitler's supreme disseminator of calumny and hatred had made him master of every trick and twist of this iniquitous profession. Since he had made the science of Jew-baiting with the poison pen his speciality, he found no difficulty in applying his evil genius to the peculiar conditions prevailing in Roumania where, for many decades, the 'problem' of the Jews had been raised to a front rank political issue.

King Carol, Hitler and Lupescu

BUT THE SIXTIES and seventies made him cry. He couldn't stand the sense of loss. How had they all been persuaded to hand their keys back to their jailors?

Was freedom really so frightening?

Evidently a lot of Romanians thought so.

BORN IN GEORGIA

President Ion Iliescu pledged yesterday to keep Romania on the road to democracy and to end what he called the country's moral decay.

Reuter/Majorca Daily Bulletin, 21 June 1990

"DON'T TELL ME!" Jerry smiled at the air-stewardess as she laid her towel at the edge of the pool. He leaned his arms beside it and tried to drag his pale body higher from the water of Tooting Bec Baths. "You're psychic too!" Her answering sneer would have sunk the Bismarck. "I knew it!" Jerry was in a fairly insensitive mood that afternoon. "I like your taste in boob-tubes," got him reported to the life-guard and, "Come fly with me," thrown out of the pool area.

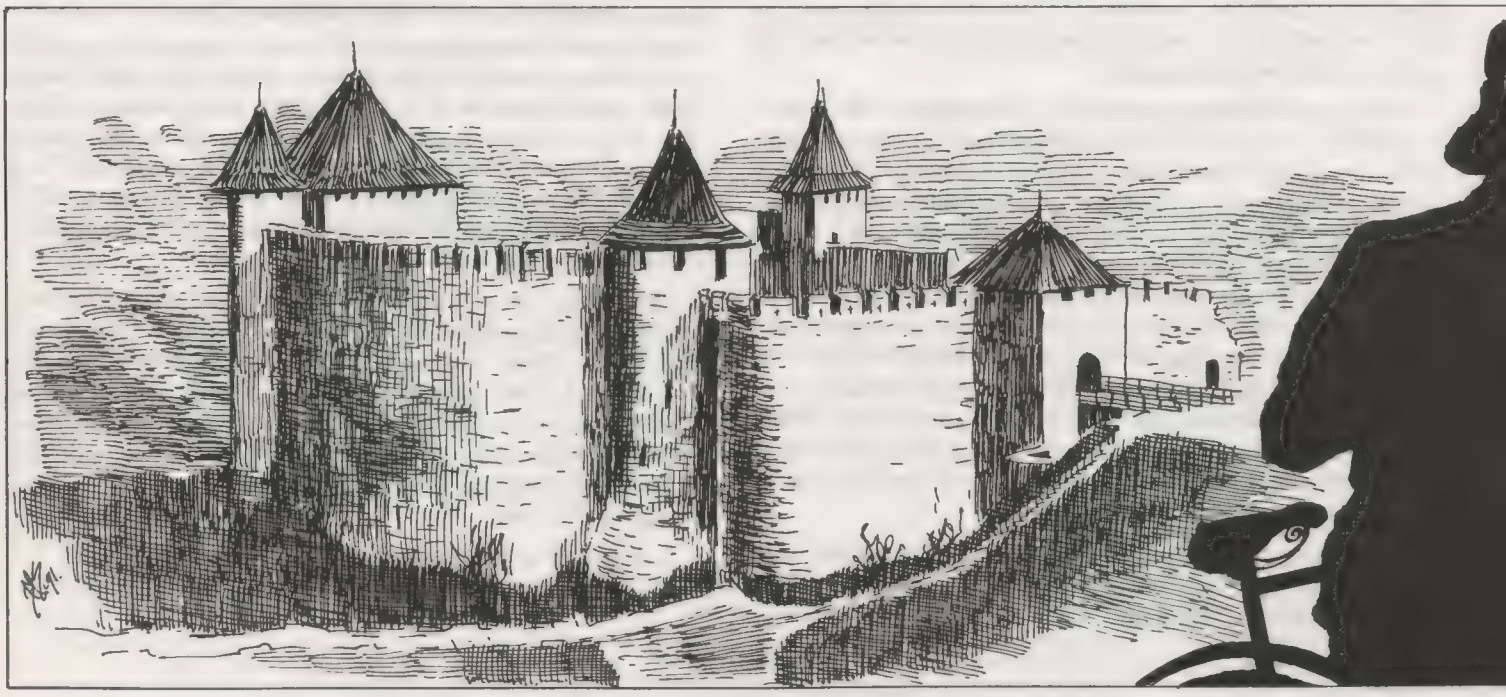
As he slouched off across Tooting Common, whistling to his horrible dog, he wondered if his grandma was home from work and maybe good for half-a-crown, or at least a bag of toffees (she did half-time at Rowntree's). He jumped further backward until he was comfortably unaware of his free movement through Time and was able to turn his attention from the stewardess, still baffled by his sixties' slang, to the toy-soldier shop back near St Leonard's Church in Streatham Hill, a few minutes walk up the main road and down towards the Common. He wanted to make sure his naval gun-team was still there. He'd given the man 9d a week for it and he was only another 1/6d away; but he couldn't be sure of anything any more. Was he creator or the created? This unlikely thought made him pop in to the quiet of the church and glare with some respect at the stained glass prophets whom he now completely confused with God. For him, God had become a plurality of saints and angels. He'd had Rudolf Steiner to thank for that. Jerry – or someone like him – grinned into the dusty shadows of the Anglican sacristy. There was nothing left to steal.

Jerry tipped his hat to the new generation and turned back to his toys.

Two more weeks and he could land a team on Forbidden Island. His sailors almost within his grasp and the summer sun melting the sweet tar of Streatham, he sauntered down towards Norbury and Jennings' second hand book shop where he planned to trade his wholesome volume of *The Captain* for a novel called *Monsieur Zenith* by Anthony Skene, his current literary favourite and inventor of Zenith the Albino, the smoothest crook that ever smoked an opium cigarette. It was Jerry's ambition to smoke an opium cigarette as soon as possible. His elders by a year had already ventured Up Town to Soho and found it good.

Meanwhile, let some other Jerry carry West London for a while. He was settling down in the South. Here only Teddy Boys lay in wait for you with razors. Anything was better than Blenheim Crescent's mephitic presence ...

But thought is resurrection. He found himself struggling to force his mother back into non-existence. Mrs Cornelius was unperturbed. She, of all people, was bound to survive. There



wasn't a holocaust made that could get her. "Why don'cher come 'ome, Jer?"

He gave up. With pouting reluctance he wheeled his big, heavy bike up the hill and down towards Elgin Crescent. He was back in Notting Dale, immediately post-Colin Wilson. His bid for some other, less melancholy, past had failed again. Somewhere, he heard his Shade saying, I was happy once.

These weren't the kind of losses he had expected.

MIDNIGHT DRIVE

As usual in the Nazi propaganda of subversion, Goebbels did not scruple about consistency in his scurrilities with regard to Madame Lupescu, the king's companion of twenty years. Some of his 'stories' represented her as the instrument of 'capitalist profit-mongers, concessionaires and exploiters', others contained plausible tales to show she was the agent of 'international Bolshevism'. Contradiction of this kind never worried the Minister of Propaganda and Enlightenment. Hitler had laid down, in *Mein Kampf*, his fundamental principle of good political tactics and propaganda – the bigger the lie, the more easy its acceptance, the more effective its result.

King Carol, Hitler and Lupescu

"EAT YER TEA, Jer. I'll be back in abart an 'ar." Mrs Cornelius settled her hat and contemplated benevolently the slices of bread and Marmite, the Mars bar she had laid out for her son. "There's some Tizer in ther cupboard."

With the air of a mother who had more than fulfilled her duty, she left for the *Blenheim Arms*.

Jerry took pleasure in his food. It was one of his favourite meals. The area door opened and he saw Old Sammy put his hesitant head into the room. "Wotcher, young 'un. Ma in?"

"Pub," said Jerry. "Can I come and watch your telly later, Sam?"

"Course you can, lad." Old Sammy was grateful for anyone willing, for whatever reasons, to accept his affection.

I BEG YOUR PARDON

Speaking after his inauguration in Bucharest's Atheneum concert hall, Iliescu was unapologetic about his government's role in dealing with street protests last week, although he admitted there had been excesses.

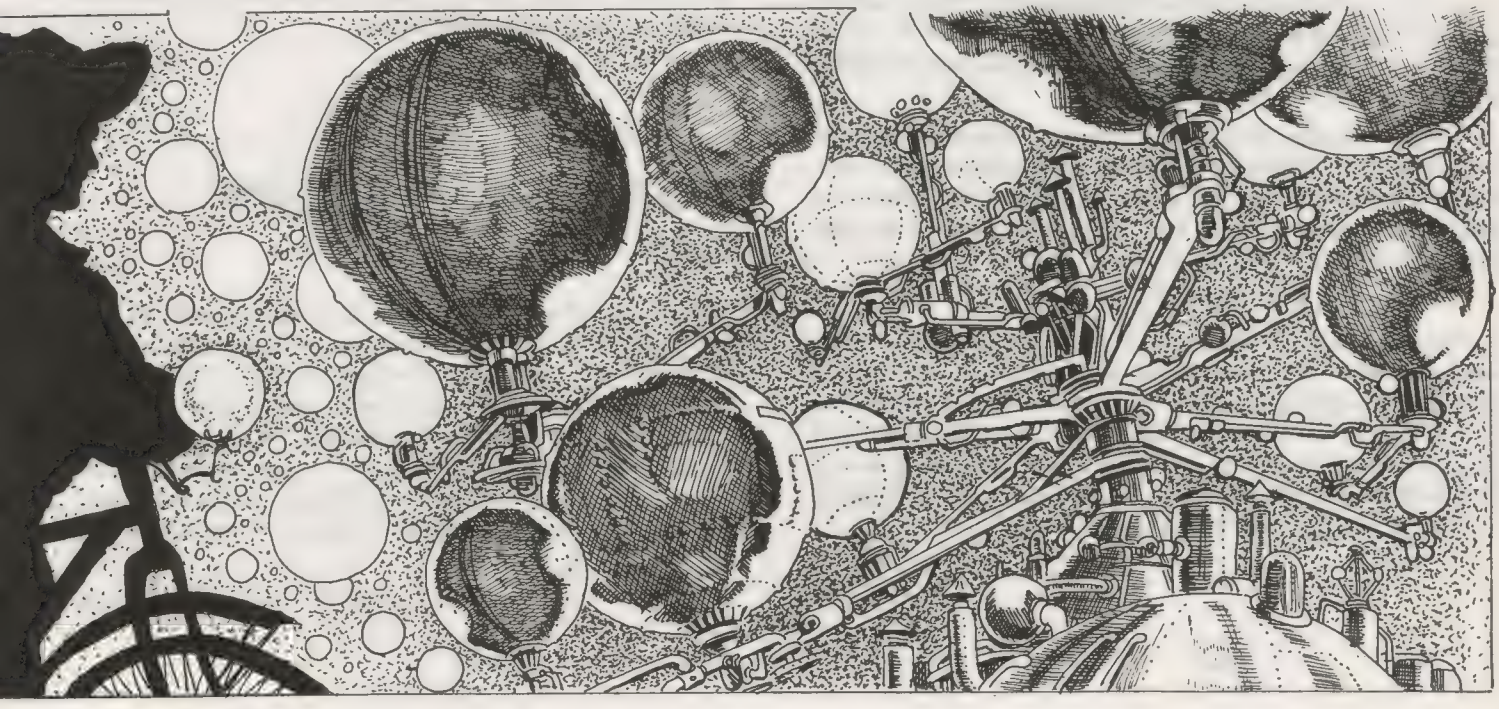
Reuter/Majorca Daily Bulletin, 21 June 1990

THE MANNERS OF these people, with their casual discourtesies and easy racialism, soon made Jerry as uncomfortable with the 50s as he had been with the 80s. What had changed? He was getting fazed again, almost as bad as he had become by the early 60s. "Arse that way, elbow that," he told himself ritualistically as he made his cautious progress – some lemming to its cliff – back to his Royal Albert.

He was experiencing a certain amount of deterioration. As he pedalled, the mist grew warm and began to stink, reminding him of the wartime factories of Newcastle, of heavy locomotives panting in the steely evening light; the only colour the vivid flames of furnaces and mills. He had no idea where he was.

"Time travel had for too long been a matter of instinct, its secrets the province of romantic bohemians and crazed experimenters." Bishop Beesley spoke from somewhere at the centre of his steam-driven orrery, from some unlearned future. "It's high time we brought System and Intellect to the Question of Time." He pronounced some reasonable imitation of what he guessed was the current mode. Or was it post-mode now?

Jerry was beginning to sense his bearings. Somewhere from the late 80s he heard a howl of terrible xenophobia as a thousand intellectuals turned their hatred on the Unavoidable Present and many thousands of Muslims expressed their anger with two hundred years of insult which they had previously pretended



to themselves was only the province of the ignorant and ill-educated amongst their neighbours.

I'D RATHER GO BLIND

> Next day it was announced that the government had decided to form a new 'Party of National Regeneration', a fusion of all political parties into one 'National Renaissance Front'. There was no specific abolition of the former political factions, but by clear and unmistakable inference, they ceased to exist. Henceforth, Roumania was to be a One Party State whose principal members were to be nominated and whose purpose was to be 'the Defence of the Fatherland'. The leader of the new Single Party was King Carol. Elections would be held, it was stated, but only candidates approved by the Single Party leaders and declaring allegiance to it, would be permitted to seek the votes of the electors ...
>
> *King Carol, Hitler and Lupescu*

"ALL WE HAVE to remember now, Mr Cornelius, is that many of our new sister countries believe quite profoundly in the virtues of tyranny. To them the words 'freedom' and 'autonomy' are, on other lips but theirs, the ultimate obscenities. And as for a United Germany, God knows what this will mean to my constituents!"

Miss Brunner nervously adjusted her twinset and glanced at her watch. "I'm on such a tight schedule, these days." Reminded of that, she breathed a sigh of relief. All she knew was control. It so reduced one's anxieties.

Jerry scratched his stomach with a borrowed loofah. His fatigues were far too tight for him and if she wanted the truth, he'd cheerfully give it to her.

"I'm too old to be a revolutionary," he said. "I'm just trying to hang on to the gains we made. And that's why we had to act, Miss Brunner."

"You won't get far," she said. The movement of her hand to her perfect auburn hair was a kind of spasm. "You're having trouble breathing as it is." Unconsciously she reached for her own pulse. "And don't think I'm afraid of any hidden gin bottles or whatever it is you believe you have."

"I believe I have the killing-harmony, the power-without-fear, white-eyes!" His fingers twitching towards his needle-gun, Jerry uttered something like his old mindless grin. "What you people never allow for is just how short a distance you can push some of us before we stop going with the flow."

"You disgusting old hippy."

"I never was an old hippy, darling." And he plugged her with one neat shot to the cortex. "I was only reborn in the 90s." He gave his wizened hands a wipe and returned to the video he had been planning to watch before she interrupted him. It was *Cat Ballou*. He was desperately in need of a new role model, even if it had died in the meantime. Concentrating on the credits, he reached for his pipe and his rocky.

COLD SNAP

> President Iliescu of Romania claimed yesterday that the police and parts of the army had been 'psychologically incapable' of putting down anti-government protests, which was why he was setting up a new riot-control force. An unrepentant Mr Ionescu accused Western governments of overlooking the difficulties provoked in the police and army by the traumatic experiences during the December revolution. He also disclosed that he was considering a formal request to Britain to train the controversial new force.
>
> *The Times*, 25 June 1990

IT JUST MIGHT be Hampton Court, he thought, wheeling his bicycle out of the maze at night. The Tardis – or police box – put the date at around 1965, the year of his immaculate conception, when an empty winter had been filled with the warmth of very young children and an overwhelming sense of responsibility, to self and to them. Jerry now wondered if that hadn't been just before the depression set in. The times were a-changing and interpretations varied; he was all at sea.

Defeated again, he returned to Blenheim Crescent. It had been an age since he had cycled that far in the snow.

"'Ere 'e is!" His mum came to the door, her sleeves rolled up on her red forearms and a huge knife in her right hand. "A regular bad effin' penny, ain'cher, Jer?"

"'Appy Xmas, Jer, boy." His brother Frank's weaselly expression shifted between pacific leer and burning hatred. It was his common response to Jerry's arrival. "Caff's on 'er way, she said."

Jerry shivered. He was not sure he was emotionally ready for his sister's manifestation. Yet it was too late to worry.

Obediently, he took his old place at the table.

"Now, Jer – isn't this better than freedom?" Frank grinned across the turkey as their mother poised the knife, her sweat dripping from elbow to half-burned carcass, to mingle with her coarse gravy.

At last Jerry remembered what he had always loved in his sister and no longer felt afraid of her.

OUR LOVE IS RUNNIN' OUT

> The knife-sharp air bit painfully into my face when I stepped from the Orient Express at Bucharest in the early hours of New Year's Day, 1938. The gloomy station, silent save for the shufflings of the few sleepy porters and the tired hissings of the engine, gave emphasis to the frigidity, as it were, of my entry into the Roumanian Capital. It was not a heartening beginning of my mission to investigate the real meaning of King Carol's nomination of the fascist, anti-semitic government of Octavian Goga.
>
> *King Carol, Hitler and Lupescu*

LYING ON THE artificial beach at Nova Palma Nova reading a Largetype edition of *The Prisoner of Zenda* and listening to Ivor Novello's *Glamorous Night* on his Aiwa, Jerry congratulated himself: an earlier generation would have been reading *The Prisoner of Zenda* on a Blackpool or a Brighton beach. What Romania really needed at the moment was a decent Colonel Zapt. But then everything kept changing. Maybe Ruritania was no longer a viable model? The thought filled him with sadness. He looked up, expecting to see the towers of Zenda fading before his eyes, but his horizon was filled with neon, with the magic names of a different age – Benny Hill, Peter Sellers and Max Bygraves; McDonald's and Wimpy.

This vision disturbed him. These days almost any vision disturbed him.

Some sixth sense warning him, he looked up. Una Persson was tramping across the canary-coloured sand. She wore a Laura Ashley sun-dress and blue Bata strap-ups. In her hands was a heavy Kalashnikov.

That was enough for Jerry. He retreated into the romance of an earlier age and would have stayed there were it not for the touch of cold steel on his sphincter.

"I need some help, Jerry," she said. She had removed one earphone. It was hideous. Her voice mingled with a hundred machine noises, the video arcades, discos and pinball halls, the traffic of road, sea and air.

"What?" He desperately tried to hear her. It was too late to try to cross her. "Eh?"

"Come along now." She reached towards his other ear.

"Damn you Rasendyll," he said. "Can't they find some other poor devil to be king?"

"You ain't the king, boy. You'd be lucky to be queen for a day. You missed your chances." Shakey Mo's little rat face twitched with a kind of lascivious rage. Hanging about near the steps up to the promenade, he had for obscure reasons smeared blacking on his face. He, too, was sporting a rather unfashionable olive green leisure suit. Things had to be bad when Mo got this patronising. "Where the hell you been, man? Life goes on, you know, even if you haven't noticed."

"I ain't drunk, I'm just drinkin'," said Jerry.

"You could have fooled me." He removed his wraparound shades with a flick of the wrist once considered sexy.

"Which isn't saying a lot, really." After a second's hesitation Mrs Persson dumped her rifle and the book beside the hot-dog stand. She couldn't make up her mind about them. Nothing stayed obsolete for long, these days.

WHEN A GUITAR PLAYS THE BLUES

The National Salvation Front government, accused by critics of being closely linked to the Communist Party of late dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, appears to be trying to mend the damage to its international reputation caused by last week's events.

Reuter/Majorca Daily Bulletin, 24 June 1990

"IT'S NOT MUCH of a job and you don't get a whole lot of respect." Jerry brushed rain off his sodden fedora. "The pay's no good and the hours are lousy – yet there's something in you has to go on doing it, the way other guys get hooked on dope or, maybe, a woman. Someone has to walk down those streets respectable people don't like to know about, especially when they might have a relative living there. Someone has to take the insults and the bruises and, occasionally, the bullet, so that those respectable folks can sleep peacefully in their beds. In some ways you're a messenger between two mutually selfish sections of society – the Glutted Rich and the Vicious Greedy. Well, maybe that's exaggerating just a tad ...

"There's a lot of people in between, a lot of little people. A lot of bad women gone right, and good men gone down, and whores who should have been virgin brides in Wyoming, and judges who a more enlightened age would recognise as calculating psychopaths – and all the rest; every piece of human flotsam, and every kind of virtue ... Courage-in-adversity, rotten wealth, Church-pure poverty, damned near insane self-sacrifice and the pettiest, meanest kind of greed you ever heard about. You wouldn't believe it. You don't have to. Only I have to believe it. It's my job."

DON'T TOUCH ME THERE

I had hoped to be able to secure interviews with the leading figures in the political drama which had set the world wondering and had created consternation in Roumania. I was hopeful of being able to discuss the situation with the King himself, with Goga, and with the most significant figure in Roumania, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, leader of the Iron Guard, fascist, terrorist, murderer and most rabidly violent of Jew-baiters. Arrangements to see King Carol and Goga were made with comparative ease; to meet Codreanu proved a much more difficult task.

King Carol, Hitler and Lupescu

JERRY WASN'T EVEN sure of immortality any more. The rules kept changing on him and the chronic vibrations were making him ill.

"You're overstretched, lad." With a flourish of his pale grey moustache, Major Nye guided the helicopter away from Dublin where he had discovered Jerry wandering on the frozen Liffey. "You need a bit of time to yourself."

"I didn't think it was allowed."

Clearly Major Nye found this remark in doubtful taste.

"There's not a lot left, after all," Jerry added lamely. "What with the Ukrainian going off like that."

"You're just depressed because of your dream of anarchy. Well, old son, it seems it isn't to be."

"Are you sure there's been no news from Scotland?"

"Not the kind you've been hoping for. I doubt if there's a black flag left flying or an anarchist keel still in the sky. Those days are over, dear boy, even in your fantasies. They never had a chance. Too romantic, even for an experienced India hand like me!"

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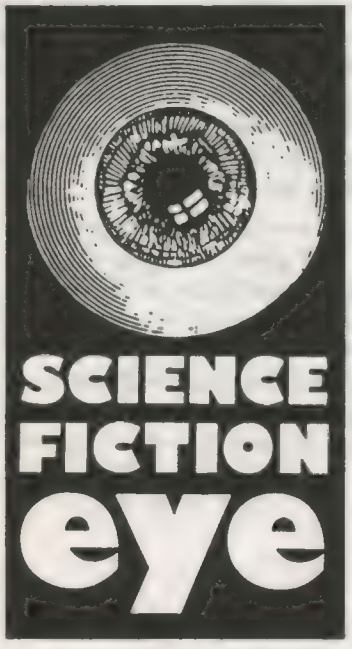

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NEW SF ALLIANCE

The choice is yours ...

The references were getting blurred. Jerry understood now why the only bits of history that were interesting were the bits that were almost never recorded. The slow turning of an honest Bavarian burger into a Waffen SS fanatic, for instance. These mysteries remained, so it seemed, the province of unreliable liars and braggarts, falsifiers of their own identities, the novelists.

"One's qualifications stand for nothing these days," said Major Nye, turning happily towards Wilton and poetry. "But I'm sure there's some sort of niche you can find for yourself."

Jerry felt the old spirit slipping away again. He was regretful. He had never been able to reach Bucharest in the hey-day of his powers.

"Here we are, dear boy. Keep your chin up."

With cheerful confidence Major Nye put them down.

COLD LONELY NIGHTS

> Mr Iliescu, the son of a railway worker and a one-time favourite of Ceausescu, was not specific about who would be recruited into the new force, designed to deal with political violence. Already many miners have volunteered. Some opposition politicians and student leaders have likened it apprehensively in advance to a modern version of the Nazi brownshirts. "We shall have to see about that," the president replied when asked about its composition.
>
> *The Times*, 25 June 1990

THE MILES OF underground concrete, like some vast, unpopulated parking garage, were lit by busy gas jets set at alarming intervals. Between them were shadows, the stink of blood, the horribly uncleansable miasma of terror. He had to be in the foundations of some evil, if monumentally unimaginative, fortress. He had almost certainly made it to Ceausesculand. Propping the bike against a malodorous pillar, he swung off his rucksack. Beneath his sandwiches and his thermos he discovered a psychic map of the city. It was not as out-of-date as he had feared and Jerry found it easy to follow into the 90s. He paused to do the last of his Columbian Silver. At moments like this, grit and integrity only came in powder form. In some ways, he thought, it was like sniffing the dust of some ancient and forgotten empire; the nearest he got to dreaming, these days.

STRIKE LIKE LIGHTNING

> I took up residence in the Athenee Palace Hotel and later in the morning after my arrival, I took stock of this most notorious caravanserai in all Europe. It was exciting to realise that here I was in the meeting place of the Continental spies, political conspirators, adventurers, concession hunters, and financial manipulators. Here at the crossroads, as it were, dividing Europe from Asia, in the centre of the Balkan cockpit, were hatched most of the plots and devilments that, in days gone by, upset a government here, fomented a revolution there and, on occasion, planned an assassination.
>
> *King Carol, Hitler and Lupescu*

MISS BRUNNER WAS beside herself. "We put a stop to all that," she said. "We made a land where the English middle classes could bray with confidence."

"Oh, it's not such a bad old world." Gratefully Sir Kingsley lifted another pink gin to the kind of triangular sphincter which was his mouth. In fact, things were looking up, all in all, he thought, at *The Jolly Englishman*. He stared bleakly at his white, puffy fist and longed for his old pals. Most of them had failed to make it into the decade. Come to think of it, he reflected with a mourning grin, so had he.

Miss Brunner thought his attitude defeatist. "You might be enjoying the decline, Sir K, but some of us aren't going to stand for it."

"Fair enough." The embodiment of the nation's literary aspirations offered her a weary leer. "Bend over, darling."

She couldn't resist power, no matter how deliquescent it had become. She giggled and ordered him another double. "You were honoured," she reminded him admiringly, "for services to your country."

"For services to Time, actually." He accepted the gin.

"I do love you intellectuals."

"Bugger Jane Austen."

"Fuck George Eliot."

"Pat Norman Mailer on the bottom." At this, he recovered himself.

"Naturally." On trembling palm she offered him her pork scratchings. "How's your little boy?"

Not everything, she consoled herself, had gone to pot.

"I heard they named a pub after me in Magalluf," said the old penman proudly. Then, almost immediately, he grew gloomy again.

"My luck, it's full of blokes in pink underpants drinking Campari Soda."

FANNING THE FLAMES

> Denying any dichotomy between his speech to the miners and his subsequent more measured address at his inauguration, Mr Iliescu said: "What is fundamental is who started the violence and who provoked the violence."
>
> *The Times*, 25 June 1990

JERRY'S MOPED WAS acting up. It had never been as reliable as the Royal Albert, even on normal roads, and was behaving like a grumbling old dog as it picked its way along Romania's ancient tracks.

The great chasms and towering rocks, the gigantic torrents, gloomy forests and barren shale all inspired in him an awe of

Nature. After less than two hours of this experience he found himself talking loudly to himself in German.

From Goethe it was but a short step to the Jewish Problem, something he had hoped to avoid on this holiday.

"Blut ist blut," he sang resignedly. *"Sturm me daddy, eighty to the car..."* and with this he began a descent into the cloud-hidden depths of a mysterious valley. So much for the subtleties of the human spirit! For him there were more urgent demands on his attention. How on earth had the English managed to make themselves the narrowest and most reactionary people in Europe and still see themselves as generous and enlightened? It was a wonder to him, and a privilege, to observe this fantastic progress at first hand. Gibbon, for instance, had been forced to speculate and, from his position, had found the decline of Rome almost impossible to accept. Increasingly, this had led him into those mighty abstractions the Victorians created from the stuff of the Enlightenment and which, they convinced themselves, were solid as the British Empire.

"Das Volk ehrt den Künstler, Johnny."

Marrakech was looking better all the time. Jerry was glad he had lost none of his old instincts. In fact he seemed quicker on his toes than he had been in his glory days. He, better than anyone, knew when to head for the border.

YOU AND I

On a certain day, the Jewish community was informed that the Yellow Badge had been introduced in all of Roumania. A sample was sent in with the strict injunction that in a few days the Yellow Badge must be ready and all Jews, men, women and children, were instructed to wear them. In Bukovina, this was immediately introduced... This measure had a devastating effect on the mood of Bucharest... People wearing the Yellow Badge were barred from street cars ... could not go to any offices or approach any authorities. This decree drew a pall over and had a depressing effect upon the city.

King Carol, Hitler and Lupescu

"PERU IS GETTING altogether more interesting, now that a bloody writer's been beaten by a Jap." Lifting a gentle hand from his Mars Supapac Bishop Beesley slipped a minibar into his mouth. Outside, through the hotel window, dreamed the dusty streets of some South American capital. "But it needs a better man than me to open up the interior properly. I haven't the stomach for it." He descended with a sigh, inch by painful inch, into the largest armchair. "Besides, a man in my position has to cultivate a certain detachment." He looked thoughtfully towards the street where a tall old Englishman paused to peer up. "Can that be Major Nye?"

The hushed tones of the serious professional Christian invaded his mouth and Jerry was startled by this apparent procession until he remembered that the Bishop was expecting another visitor.

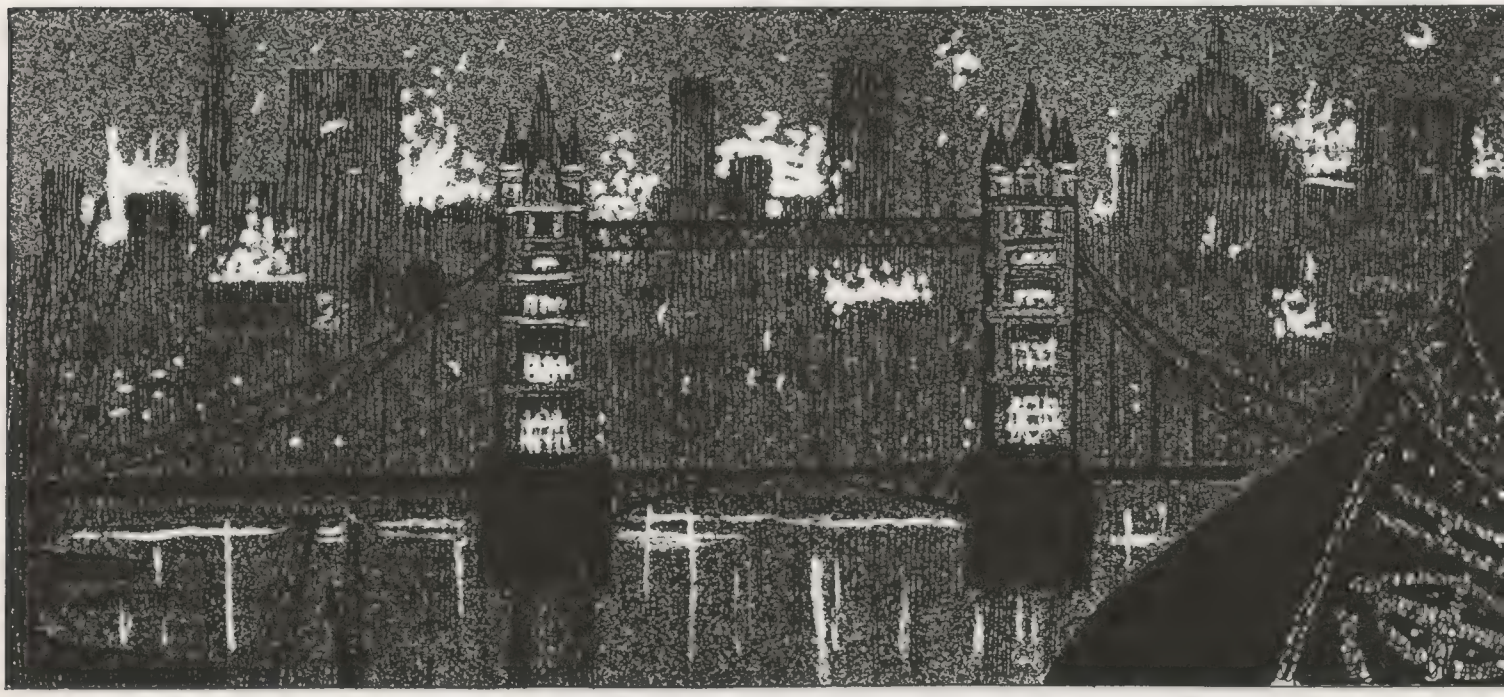
"Can we drop you anywhere tomorrow, bishop?" he asked carefully.

Beesley turned eyes upon him that were full of a ghastly benevolence. "Perhaps, dear boy. You're very kind." As if in sudden anxiety he glanced again at the window but the Englishman had strolled on. Jerry knew Beesley was never happy in Catholic countries, especially Latin America. He had been heading for some other Rio, some magical retreat, when the plane had been diverted here. He stroked his jowls and looked thoughtfully down at his sweat-stained tennis whites.

Jerry turned to leave.

"Do you know?" said Bishop Beesley with some resentment. "The chap downstairs mistook me for a German this morning."

"Don't worry, bishop." The old assassin picked a crumb of chocolate from the handle of the black mitre-case. Noticing how worn and shiny it had become reminded him how long the bishop had been on the run. "Nobody else will." He closed the door softly, as if upon a corpse.



Downstairs the electricity was off again and, as if waiting for the ride to begin, flies had settled thickly on the blades of the motionless ceiling fan. Others crawled across the darkened screen of a dormant TV still watched by the janitor, as if he perceived some drama denied to all but himself. Jerry glanced into the brilliant street, the glaring stucco, the graffiti and the Coca Cola signs. Maybe it was time to go back to the wild side of life.

The Californian surf was beginning to sound good again and from somewhere overhead he was sure he could hear the comfortable presence of a rescue chopper.

There had to be somewhere else to go than a colonised Ladbroke Grove, the Cotswolds or a decolonised North Africa.

He had settled on Liberia even before the helicopter descended into a little square, blowing dust through the beaded curtains of the run-down shops and cantinas, sending dogs scattering reluctantly into the deeper shadows of the alleyways.

Professor Hira, his round brown face glowing with sweat and self-satisfaction, reached down a hand. "Welcome aboard, old chap. Oh, by the way –" the Brahmin paused as Major Nye gunned the engine to keep her steady – "Liberia's out now, too. Any ideas?"

Jerry gave in. Angkor Wat. Anuradaqpura, Luxor and New York ... all his favorite ruins had been taken over by someone. They'd even sold his roof garden to Richard Branson. To pay his debts, they said. He hadn't realised he owed anything.

He gave a hazy thought to Sid Vicious as he was lifted dramatically over the rooftops and spires into a pearly reality he had never hoped to find again.

"You missed the second coming," said Major Nye. "Didn't he, professor?"

"I think so. Or possibly just God's second childhood." Hira giggled. He had a liking for mild blasphemies.

DEVIL CHILD

> The reluctance of the army to rush to the aid of the government in the recent rioting has been interpreted differently by many Western intelligence experts, who claimed that many officers and soldiers were reluctant to oppose rioters who alleged that the government was run by neo-communists. As part of the power struggle the interior minister General Mihai Chitac, was dismissed after the rioting and control of the police switched from the interior to the defence ministry.
>
> *The Times*, 25 June 1990

OLD SAMMY CAME out of the kitchen into the alley. He was red with sweat. His stained white hat and apron fumed with the greasy heat of the chop shop whose flaring, agitated jets were the constant of his busy Friday night trade. He deep-fried pies and chops to order. Those boiling vats, in which all kinds of questions floated, reminded Jerry what eternal damnation must be like. No wonder those poor bastards were terrified. No wonder they clung to their ramshackle faiths – their habits which they could no more discard than the Jews in 1933 or the English in 1979. They were locked into self-made prisons, justifying all that was most cowardly and most cautious and most unjust in human society. He'd rather have Unitarianism which at least believed in handing out soup and a sandwich from time to time. Faith, he had to admit, was a bit of a baffling one. It couldn't be good for people.

Nothing fitted.

He'd ride with the tide for a while. After all, the cards were still settling. What had he been getting so angry about?

The sandwiches weren't, anyway, that bad. He'd recommend the Tuna Melt.

"I had a feeling I was getting in touch with the occult." On his apron Sammy wiped fingers swollen and impure as his sausages. "But I suppose that's typical at my time of life, isn't it?"

Jerry shook his head. He glanced carefully up the alley. "Any port in a storm, eh, Sam? When in doubt consult your stars. What can you lose?"

"What *can* you lose, old son?" Sammy nodded with melancholy introspection, perhaps revealing all the many things he had already lost.

Above their heads was the blindness of the East End night in those precious years between the Blitz and the Thames Developments.

"There must be easier ways than this of making a living." Sammy drained off another wave of sweat with his heavy arm and dashed the liquid to the concrete of the step. "So long, Jerry. So long, squire. So long." He went back to his chops and his pies. He had only recently introduced the pies to compete with a modern formica cafe across the street, and was not sure if they were worth it. They were bloody hard to fry.

Jerry, munching his free pasty, pushed his bike with one hand round the corner into the blazing white light of Whitechapel High Street, a salutary vision, where the wide roads were already gone through Leman Street and half the ruins of his youth. Leman Street had become little more than a slip-road and Wapping Old Stairs was blocked with corrugated iron on which posters for Tommy Steele and Bill Haley were already fading. The grey iron was bent and torn in places and through the gaps Jerry could watch the rain approaching across the moody waters of his Thames, where pieces of timber and old Tizer bottles jogged and drifted above depths which promised every horror. Even the agitated lapping of the water had a sinister, neurotic quality, and Jerry, never a keen East Ender, was glad when he got to the Tower and the waiting motorboat.

"We thought we'd lost you," said Mitzi Beesley, decisively securing her Mae West.

"How was your mum?" Shakey Mo asked over his shoulder as he started the engine.

"She wasn't working tonight." Jerry studied the water, swirling like a Mr Softee, and wondered just how many of these memories were actually his.

FROZEN ALIVE

> The lawyers and doctors, almost without exception, remained in Cernauti when the Russians took it over; a number of Bukovina Jews, who had been living in Bucharest, left for Cernauti when the Russians came, stating that they preferred to live under Russian domination and subsist on dry bread than to live under Roumanian rule and be considered below contempt.
>
> *King Carol, Hitler and Lupescu*

"LOATHSOME, UNCOUTH, LOUTISH." Bishop Beesley waved an eloquent Yorkie. "Or am I being unjust, do you think, to that scum of the earth. I like you, my dear sir, I really do. You're a wag, sir, if you don't mind me saying so."

Nobody paid him any attention. The going was proving unexpectedly hard and it was all Shakey Mo could do to keep the armoured car on course. "I still say it's no part of the Lake District."

Major Nye wanted to offer them his definition of a gentleman. Eventually, to take their minds off their discomfort, they gave in, though Mo Collier's snorts and mutterings remained in the background.

"A gentleman," Major Nye announced, "should be courteous to all and considerate of all, respectful of all, no matter what their station or their sex. He should be thoroughly read in the literature of the day as well as that of the past, and should be conversant on matters of Science, Nature and the Arts, have some practical reading in moral philosophy and some practical understanding of all these things; he should also have a good knowledge of cookery, fencing, fancy sewing, water colouring, medicine and, of course, riding. He should always be able, with coolness and self-knowledge, to defend his actions, both morally and socially. He should have some accountancy and comparative religion, some household management, some training in the care of the sick and injured as well as the elderly. He must know the arts of self-defence, perhaps both Kara-te and Tai Chi, and certain aspects of infant responsibility. His education should emphasise courses in algebra, geography, history and politics, but should otherwise share the common curriculum."

"You're a determinist then, Major Nye?" Professor Hira was the only one who had been listening.

"Not in the strictest of senses, old boy, no. In fact I think politics, like religion, are a man's own damned affair, pardon my French. But live and let live, eh?"

"Have you ever run across such a paragon as you describe, Major?" Professor Hira adjusted his ear-piece. The radio had, for days, been delivering Radio One, set to some antiseptic cycle of current singles repeated one after the other every hour for forty-eight hours until two sides were replaced, until another forty-eight hours had passed, and so on. Professor Hira thought it a miraculous little system and was irritated by any suggestion that it was already hopelessly out of date. Modern technology could randomise anything these days.

"Not in this century, no, old boy."

"Sometimes," said Mo, "you don't even need to do any kind of programme. It's the very latest in pseudo-technology. Wow!" His fingers played over endless invisible keys. He was programming air-computer. His days were truly filled. "Cerebral, man. Punch that code!" He could still function on simple levels and was useful for his old, instinctive skills. "Bam! Psychedelic! Post-modern! Wow! Chaos!"

YEARS SINCE YESTERDAY

> Iliescu said Romania had emerged in a state of moral decay from the era of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu, who was toppled and executed last December.
>
> *Reuter/Majorca Daily Bulletin*, 21 June 1990

"GAS," SAID CAPTAIN Maxwell, the English engineer, replacing his stein of Pilsner Urquhart carefully upon the laminated oak, "is the Future." He glared with a kind of proprietorial

benevolence around the bierkeller. "That's where the fortunes will be made."

From outside, in Wencleslas Square, the Australian Morris Dancers gave their precise rendition of the Flory Dance. They were said by some to be the hit of the Festival. He looked at Jerry before uttering a hearty laugh. It was as if someone had farted through their face.

Jerry gagged.

PLAYING FOR KEEPS

One evening in the early weeks of the 'New Order' in Roumania, a group of armed men, in the green uniform of the Iron Guard, burst into the country house at Sinaia, as the old man of seventy sat at his desk in the study. They fell upon the 'Patriarch of the Roumanian People' and dragged him out of the house to the dark road outside. As he lay on the ground, they cut off his famous flowing white beard, riddled him with bullets, cut his throat, stabbed the already lifeless body and threw it into a sodden ditch by the wayside. When the torn, beardless corpse of Nicolai Jorga was discovered the next morning, there was found, stuffed in his mouth, a copy of *Neamul Romanesc*, dated September 9, 1940, containing the signed 'leader' entitled: 'On the departure of King Carol'. Thus did Roumania, under Hitler's 'New Order' directed by the Nazi Gauleiter 'Red Dog' Antonescu, achieve the 'moral restoration' which this Roumanian general swore to his King, Mihail, to be the holy cause of the overthrow of Carol the Second.

King Carol, Hitler and Lupescu

"EITHER THE HUMAN race is going to have to improve its memory, lose it altogether, or get a new one." Catherine Cornelius gave her brother a dismissive kiss. "You can't fight that kind of amnesia. You might as well give up."

"Never say die, love." Mrs Cornelius went by with a pie. "I carn't bloody believe it's Christmas again!" This was her great day of power and she was celebrating.

"God help us, every one," said Jerry.

He shared a despairing wink with his sister.

"I think I'm going to have to slip out for a bit."

She hated to abandon him, but there wasn't much worth saving at the moment.

WOUND UP TIGHT

Two West German tourists and two Israelis were injured yesterday when a bomb believed planted by Palestinian militants exploded at the Dead Sea resort of Ein Gedi, police said.

Reuter/Majorca Daily Bulletin, 24 June 1990

BISHOP BEESLEY TURNED his head away. For some days now he had taken to wearing a grotesque Commedia del'Arte mask under his mitre. This, together with the cramped conditions of their bunker, tended to hamper his movements until now he was content merely to raise at regular intervals a Snickers to his maw. They were beginning to object to his smell which, though sweet, had a distinctly rotten tinge. His daughter Mitzi had refused point blank to get into the bunker with him and even now sat, with every appearance of comfort, in a wicker chair they had found for her and placed on the roof. From time to time she lifted her old Remington and sighted reminiscently along its barrel. The smoke from the ruins of the Barbican was beautiful in the late sunshine. A gentle breeze moved the purple heads of the fireweed and Jerry felt at peace again. He stretched out beside her, his chin in his hands.

"It can't keep going round and round forever, can it?" He blinked "Where am I?" He looked to where the armoured car was still parked. "Romantic."

"Only just," said Beesley, his voice slurred and muffled by chocolate, his mask and the concrete.

Jerry was experiencing such extraordinary *déjà vu* that he could no longer register his surroundings. He glared at the smoke which had become a sort of screen on which were projected a sickening procession of images, each one only subtly different from the last.

"It's Time, I suppose," he said. "It seems all the same. What's wrong?" He raised himself up in alarm.

For once Bishop Beesley had an observation ready.

"Reductio ad absurdum," he said with the hint of a blessing.

He rose suddenly, Mars wrappers rustling and falling about him like autumn leaves.

"Are they here, yet?"

Gradually, all the occupants of the bunker began to climb out until everyone was standing on the roof staring incuriously at the bland horizon.

"There's no time," said Jerry, "like the present."

He was surprised that the thought did not any longer depress him. ❑

Chapter titles by Lonnie Mack, Tinsley Ellis, Clarence 'Gatemouth' Brown, The Paladins, Koko Taylor, Katie Webster, Kenny Neal, Albert Collins, Roy Buchanan, Little Charlie and the Nightcats, Delbert McClinton, The Kinsey Report, Lonnie Brooks, all available on Alligator Records.

Although his verse and lyrics have appeared regularly in the magazine since **BBR** #1 in 1984, "The Romanian Question" is Michael Moorcock's first story for **BBR**, and the first to appear in a professional British SF magazine for many years. His welcome return to the trade has further been marked by his decision with David Garnett to relaunch *New Worlds* later this year.

Mr Keim

A D R I F T

Told

Mecklem

One day Mr Arthur Keim came to consciousness and found that he was engulfed in an ocean of paper clips. The clips stretched to every horizon, with only very slight variations in altitude. Mr Keim was naked, and he didn't have his glasses, but there was no one to see him, and nothing to read. Only paper clips.

The paper clips, at least the ones in Mr Keim's immediate locality, were of the small, one-inch-long variety. They were metallic, shiny, and seemingly had never been used. The sun was not visible, and neither were the stars. It was twilight, with half of the sky a clear light blue and the other half a murky purple.

When Mr Keim became aware of himself, he was lying on the surface of the sea. He struggled to stand, but succeeded only in sinking into the mass of clips up to his waist. An hour later he was immersed up to his collarbone. An hour after that, just as Mr Keim was about to sink, exhausted, into unconsciousness, the sea was struck by a great tremor. Ripples and waves appeared as the clips shook and shifted. Mr Keim sank beneath the surface. About six feet down (six inches deeper than Mr Keim was tall), his feet touched a solid surface. He had come to rest on a floor of concrete.

Mr Keim was slowly suffocating. He pushed himself off from the floor and climbed through the settling mass of clips. The tremor had stopped. Mr Keim did not dare to open his eyes. His mouth was full of clips, and his skin was being nicked in hundreds of spots as he pushed toward the surface. Finally he managed to push his face out

into the air. He choked, and spat out the clips, and looked at the sky, and breathed. The sky had not changed. There were no clouds, no stars, no sun. There was only the same cold twilight.

Mr Keim was getting thirsty.

He had originally planned to walk across the sea of clips until he found land. Now he knew that he could not. He didn't remember much about his life before this time, but he remembered that he would die if he couldn't get food and water. For a long time Mr Keim lay quite still, breathing and trying to decide what to do. His body itched all over, and he felt many small points of pain where clips had dug into him. Finally he decided that his only chance was to seek an exit in the floor.

Mr Keim's thirst was growing worse. He felt an urge to urinate, but refrained from doing so. Painfully digging his arms deep down into the mass, he began pushing clips away. Shaking his body, destabilizing the mass of clips, he pushed, first in one direction, then in another, finally freeing his arms enough to swing them in wide semi-circles, slowly forming an inverted cone of space in the surface of the sea. He worked faster, almost frantically, digging with all of his strength.

Some time later, Mr Keim was sitting in a deep hole, with clips mounded up in a circle around him. He had pulled his body free from the clips, though another foot or so remained between him and the floor.

Mr Keim's bladder ached. His lips were cracked and burning.

He cupped his hands below his penis and urinated. And he drank. And, despite the pain in his salt-stung lips and tormented body, he slept.

And when Mr Keim awoke again, his body was whole, his wounds healed. His thirst was gone, and he raised his head to thank God.

The same sunless twilight hung above. But the sea was yellow. Mr Keim slumped into the surface of an ocean of millions of bright yellow number-two pencils, all of them shiny, never used, with the points carefully sharpened. ❑

Todd Mecklem is a former (7th-generation) resident of the state of Oregon, now living near Los Angeles, California. In the mid-1980s he singlehandedly buried two large goats, though he currently works in a library. Todd has had more than 100 stories and poems published, in *New Pathways*, *Ice River*, *Nocturne*, and elsewhere.

MOGOLLÓN NEWS

by **UNCLE RIVER**
Our New Mexico Correspondent

Blasting

As most people in the Mogollón area are aware, there is lots more gold in the ground here. However, several high tech, and no doubt high priced, tests have concluded that most of it is either spread too thin or too deep to be worth the cost of getting it out.

At least that's what the big companies thought. Local folks here figured there had to be a way to get some of that ore close enough to the surface to make it profitable.

One of the men working at the mine, Sam Jaramillo, is a veteran of the war in Vietnam, where he learned how to do things with explosives most people never heard of. However, the blasting had to be cheap. The ore was only good enough to mine if it came easy. After some figuring, it was concluded that the least expensive approach was to blow the whole mass of overlying rock and dirt off with just one massive charge.

The only trouble was where to put it. The path of least resistance would land the whole mess right on the road. Shooting it over the top of the hill into Whitewater Canyon was ruled out too. This option was considered. With the Catwalk closed for repairs and hardly anyone going down there, some people believed no one would ever know where the rock came from.

Sam nixed that idea though. "It's going to be a big pile. I want to do things right." That would have meant filling an Environmental Impact Statement and public hearings. By the time the proposal was approved, if it ever was, the mine would be broke and out of business. Sam would probably be dead of old age.

With federal land out and no place safe on the mine's property, the next move was to turn to the county for a place to deposit the rock.

The Catron County officers understand what it takes to make it out here and know people need to keep expenses down. As well, it just happened they had a use for all that fill, and anything the county can get for free helps keep the taxes reasonable.

A date was set. Sam's precision blasting worked like a charm. Mining is underway on the newly accessible body of ore. And the old hole at the dump down at Pleasanton is now filled in smooth as a plate.

Appreciation is extended to the Catron County Sheriff's Department for stationing a deputy at the dump entrance to make sure no one got too close to the impact area. Since the deputy was on duty anyhow, this did not cost the taxpayers a cent. ✹

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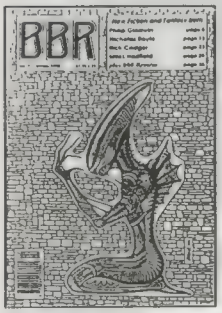

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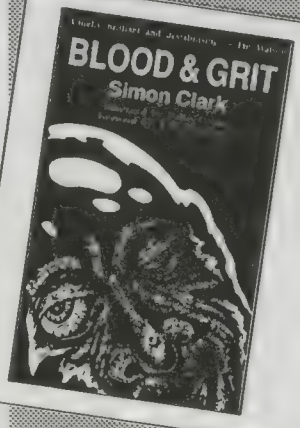

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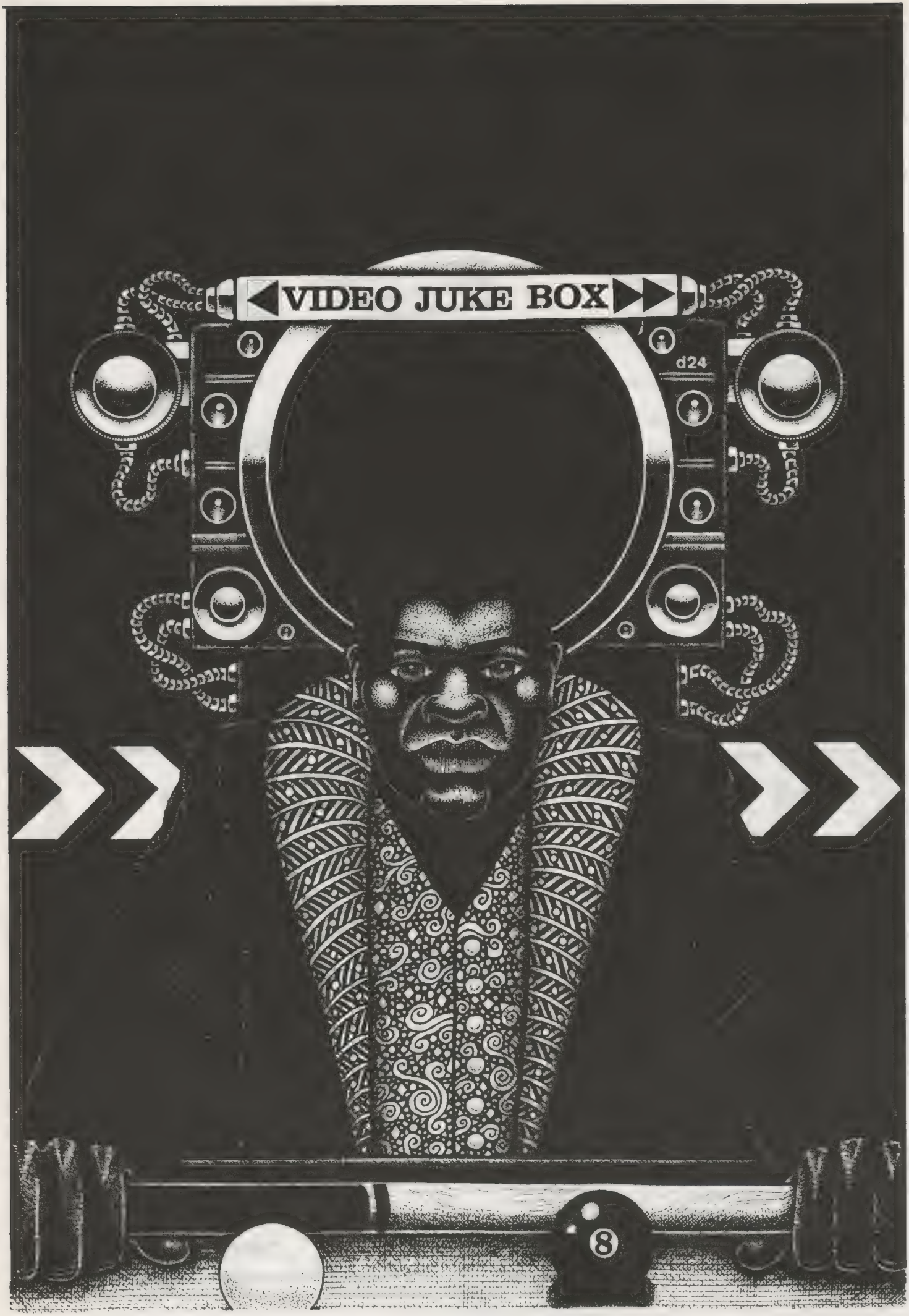

VIDEO JUKE BOX
d24
8

THEME FROM SHAFT

He'd been watching me from the jukebox for nearly an hour. The strain was showing in my game. Shinehead had already taken me for two hundred. He sank the black again and grinned, one of those ear to ear jobs he dispensed as if he held the patent on them. I smiled back, just to show him I could take it.

"Rack 'em," I said, and sipped my brew.

Shinehead broke and left me wide open on the solid balls. I put a spring in my step as I started clicking and sinking like a real pro. Then I noticed him again, and once more my game fell apart. If he was a Lawman, he could sit there and watch me all day. They like to do that. But I had my papers in my jacket and nothing remotely incriminating. That made no difference though. Being black was provocation enough. Best to just bide my time and let him make his move.

When he did, it wasn't what I expected. Blades, the barman, called me to the counter. "You gotta call, mon," he said.

I took it at the far end of the bar, thinking it was Azelia wanting to know if I was coming over. "Yeah," I said.

"Toole," a voice like iron said. "There's a man you should talk to in there."

"Who's speakin' mon?"

"Never mind that. I know you, I know what you do, so drop the act. The thing I do is set it up for people to meet, people who may prove mutually beneficial to each other. This man who I know you have seen by now, has a proposition. He came to me to see who he should see. He knew I was the man to put him in touch with the man he should see. You are this man. I have been paid well. Listen to the man and you may be paid well too." The phone went dead.

I looked at the man by the Jukebox. There was no one else. So maybe he wasn't a cop and maybe this wasn't a frame. I had nothing to lose.

"Hey bro," Shinehead said as I moved past him, "we ain't done yet."

"Later, Shine," I said and went over to the Jukebox.

"What sounds ya check fer?" I said, glancing down at the playlist.

"I'm sorry," the man said, "are you talking to me?" A grey mac two sizes too big hung from his back, his lank, straight hair hung down to his shoulders and a pair of wire-rims kept sliding down his sweat-greased nose. He wasn't law, he tried too hard not to dress like them.

"Ya seen me take de call," I said impatiently. He knew who I was which placed me at a disadvantage. "So speak to me."

"Right, the call. Uh, can we talk somewhere?" he said.

"Here is fine, mon."

"I mean, let's sit down, have a drink, on me of course."

"I has a brew then," I said, sitting down.

In a few minutes he was back with two beers.

"I was told that you arrange certain things," he said.

"Yeah? Well listen mon, first, I wanna know who was that on the line, and second, why he acting like he's my agent?"

"I really can't say but that's not important."

"Listen mon, long as ya come to me for somethin', I say what's important. Now that was who?"

"I'm sorry Mr Toole, all he does is connect parties who may be able to help each other," he said, sounding desperate.

"Then ya gotta find someone else to help ya with your problem." I stood up. "I don't deal with no-names."

"Wait," he said. "Fifty grand is a lot of money these days."

It was, a hundred grand was a lot more. "One fifty, and that fore I hear 'nuther word."

Mike O'Driscoll

"Okay," he said. "One fifty, now can we talk?"

"For one fifty mon, we can talk."

"Good." He went on. "One thing, you really must not ask me any more questions." He paused, looked around the bar, saw that everything was as it should be, and continued: "I need you to arrange a thing for me, I need it to happen fast, I need a place to stay until the thing is set up."

"Ya know me business?"

"I know a lot of things about you, I know what you do and it's in that area that I need help."

"Who the face?"

"You mean, who do I want the job done on?"

"Yeah."

"He didn't tell you? Well Mr Toole," he lowered his voice to a whisper. I felt like laughing. "I want the job done on me."

"I seen ya," I said bitterly. "A Lawman puttin' the frame on me."

"No please, listen," he said.

I looked at his face, drawn and pale, unshaven; his tired eyes roaming the bar. I listened.

"Thank you. This is no frame, I promise you. My name is Sean Lundy. I operate in a field not dissimilar from your area of expertise." He waited to see what effect this would have on me. I said nothing.

"Due to a certain technical hitch, my ability to act with impunity in this field has been severely curtailed. Soon, other people will discover this and will dispense with my services. This dispensing is likely to be terminal."

"Mr Lundy," I said, slipping out of patois. "It would be easier if you just said what you did."

"No questions please, Mr Toole." He seemed unperturbed by my character change, or maybe he just didn't notice it. "For one hundred and fifty thousand pounds surely you can lose your curiosity until it's done?"

"Okay, no questions, but there's information I'll need, tissue samples, blood types, preferred archetypes for the reconstruction etcetera."

"Yes, I see, but it's more complex than that. You see," he smiled, "I want to be black."

For awhile I sat there, sipping my drink, saying nothing. Lundy knew what I did alright, but somewhere along the line, he'd been misinformed. The traffic was all one way, and it was in the opposite direction to the one he wanted. Black was out of season. We were invisible to all but those few Lawmen who still felt it their holy duty to come to our ghettoes and crack a few skulls; we had to carry ID cards at all times, or face arrest and prosecution; crime was our only living, the only one that paid; if the system got you, that was it, no more mention, not even as a statistic. Everyone in the club dreamt that one day they'd score big enough to take the trip; get that derm-op and be on their way up into the white, corporate world.

And here was this newboy, offering me one hundred and fifty grand to fix it so he could land smack, bang in the middle of negritude. Pills, I felt like telling him, were cheaper.

"That is not," I said at last, "something I do."

"It will work, I know it." He was excited now, warming to his theme.

"Why don't you just kill yourself? Be easier."

"Look Toole, I know what I'm doing, I know what life is like for blacks, you do okay, your friends over there, they get –"

"You don't know the first thing about it, guy, your tv don't tell you a bleeding thing."

"So maybe it doesn't, but I have all this money and I'm sure you can find a use for it."

"Why, Lundy? Why go to that extreme?"

"Because it's an extreme the fuckers will never think of." He said 'fuckers' with relish, like it was a word he didn't often use and now that he had, he wanted to savour it.

"There's other restruct jobs that are guaranteed foolproof, right down to fingerprints," I said.

"I'm aware of that, but they'll search for me, they'll check out anyone they can link with a clinic for the last six months."

"So? We give you a new blood spec."

"But you can't eradicate the virus, not permanently." That was the technical hitch. He was dead.

"You tested positive. Your viral status been revoked. Sooner or later, the people you work for will be notified, right?"

"Very astute Toole."

"Being black won't cure you Lundy."

"True, but I might live for years, you never know. If they find me, that will not be the case. As a black, Toole, nobody will care what my viral status is, because I won't matter, I'll be part of the scum, but like you, I will function. This has not been a hasty retreat, I have acquired funds along the way."

"What'd you say you were involved in again?"

"As you well know, Mr Toole, I did not say. Now, do we have a deal?"

"Yeah," I said. Maybe he could make a go of it, maybe with enough money, he could carve himself a niche. "I'm your man."

Lundy arrived back at the Club Rio Negres the next morning with his medical specifications. I needed to get him off the street till the operation was set up. I left him with Blades and caught a tram up to Dalston and sat in my Nissan Vortex in its lock-up. The vehicle wasn't hot but blacks didn't have wheels like that, not in this city. Besides, if you wanted to get some place you were better off on a tram; it was cheap and it got you there the same day. Only idiots used cars, but there was still enough of them to clog the system 23 hours out of every 24. The Vortex was my office. It was air-conditioned, had a drinks cabinet, a phone and a modem-linked Sony rig.

"Mr Bonaventura please," I said when I'd dialled the phone.

"He's with a patient right now," the woman said. "Can I take a message?"

"Ask him to call Mr Toole."

"Does he have your number?" she said.

"Let's hope so," I said and hung up.

I studied Lundy's file. 32, no medical problems of note, didn't smoke, drank moderately, blood group O, no hereditary illnesses, clean carcinogenic and viral status. A clean bill, typewritten and photocopied. Except at the foot of the page, someone had written, "HIV 7 antigens present, repeat test in six weeks. Health Corps notified and recommend immediate revocation of viral status."

So how long ago had he been tested? It didn't really matter; test positive once and it was almost impossible to get a clean card again. Like Lundy had said, for a non-white it didn't make a great deal of difference, you were already at bottom; but a white man, trying to adapt to the curtailing of freedom and rights of access that was implicit in a revocation of viral status well, the prognosis would not be favourable.

The phone buzzed. It was Freddie Bonaventura. He was a reconstructive surgeon.

"What's the price on a full derm-job these days?" I asked.

"What is it, Toole? Another of your colleagues make that big score you're always talking about, or maybe this time it's you?" He laughed as if the suggestion was an impossibility.

"Not yet Freddie, but soon. Look, It's a strange one but we gotta agree finance first."

"What are the details?"

"I gotta white to black job."

He was silent for a full two minutes. "One hundred grand Toole and I'll explain why. One, going that way means he has something nasty to hide. Two, the nastier it is, the greater the probability he's wanted, by either corporate people or the law or both, thus increasing the risk to you, and ultimately to me. Three, chloasmatic drugs and melanin inducers are outside my usual field – don't have much call for them – so they'll take a while, and four, he'll have money, more than enough to pay."

"I see your logic Freddie, but I can't see him buying it." I felt duty bound to protest, even though I'd been expecting him to shoot for at least eighty.

"That's his problem. There are others in the business."

"He knows you're the best," I saw that the fifty grand left was still five times better than I'd ever made on one contract. "I'll outline your reasoning to him."

"Do that," Freddie said. "Any other details I should know?"

"Anti-body positive for HIV 7," I told him.

"Christ, what does this guy want to be? An identikit nigger? He's already got the right profile if he's carrying. I should ask for another ten for that alone. But I'm feeling generous today, so I'll let it go. A week to set it up, call me Friday. Get his specs over asap."

"Doing it now."

"Fine," Freddie said and he was gone.

I typed Lundy's details into the computer and sent them down the line with a self-destruct tag. I took a tram back to Brixton. Lundy was sleeping on a couch in the lounge. It was quiet. I called a man in Camden who owed me some favours. His name was Sammy Lee. He'd been a blood runner. We'd started out together in organs, twelve years back, before we found our separate areas of specialisation. The risks in blood running were high, but then so were the stakes. Sammy Lee was the only runner I knew who retired with a packet and without a production line of antibodies for a whole host of viral fuck-ups. I'd set up his derm job.

After the call I had a sandwich and told Shinehead to have the Vortex at the club by midnight. When he left, I sat in on a hand of poker with some meat packers. The afternoon dragged. It was after four when Lundy woke and stuck his head round the door.

"You sleep good?"

"No," he said. "Is it set up?"

Sammy Lee wasn't Sammy Lee any more, he was Gerald Corinth and after my call, he had decided to take a week's holiday. Being white bought him access to financial opportunities he had only dreamt of when he was just Sammy Lee. He could take off any time he wanted.

And of course Mr Corinth and his wife couldn't afford to be seen associating with blacks, which I understood perfectly. He had a butler, a slab of granite stuck on legs called Oscar. I didn't like him. Nevertheless, Gerald had left firm instructions that Oscar was to like me and whoever else I brought along and Oscar was determined to comply with those wishes. That was fine. I let him like Lundy all he wanted and decided to spend as much time away from the house as I could without freaking Lundy.

The next morning Lundy gave me the account codes and payment details. It was to be a straight 50% before the op, the balance on completion.

I left after breakfast, pleased Lundy was in such capable hands. I caught a tram out to Dalston. Shinehead was waiting in the car. His day-glo track suit sent a shudder through me.

"I got a safe house for you to stay."

"What about the operation?" he said, nervously.

"Week, maybe more. The uh, pharmaceutical materials needed ain't easy to obtain. Someone will pick us up tonight, take us to this house and then all you have to do is wait." I smiled to show what a breeze it was going to be.

His eyes told me he wasn't convinced.

"Can't you dress less conspicuously?" I said.

"Ain't bin no calls," he said.

"I wanna do some checking on this guy. Take this." I gave him a print-out of Lundy's medical specs and laid out two hundred pounds in tens. "Start with his doctor and don't grease any more palms than you have to. Be discreet." I made it obvious I was referring to the tracksuit. "Who you using these days?"

"A lymphoma case useta be big in the cab business. Wants a nest egg for his missus. What's the gen on this guy?"

"It don't concern you Shine, just do the job."

"I'm on it." He got out of the car.

"Call me tonight at the club," I shouted after him.

After two years with me, Shinehead was shaping up. But he was ambitious, wanted something more. I knew he was ready for it, only I just didn't have the right opportunity for him yet. Maybe something in prosthetics, which was just beginning to take off.

When he was gone I studied the codes Lundy had supplied and fed them into the Sony. His cash was divided into seven separate accounts which fed off a central pool. I had access to only one account. The seventy-five grand there had to be filtered through the central pool, through another clearing station and then into two separate accounts. One, into which I put ten thousand, was in the name of Avram Toole who, according to the bank's records, was a white businessman involved in theatrical promotions; the rest I transferred into an account in the name of one Anthony Sturgeon, a man yet to be.

Then I called both banks, gave them the correct codes and asked for a statement of each account. In turn they told Mr Toole and Mr Sturgeon what they wanted to know and thanked said gentlemen for their continued custom.

Then I called Freddie.

"The usual deal," I said. "Your fifty is now on hold. How's it looking for next week?"

"No arguments about the fee?"

"Some, but he was open to persuasion."

"Good. I'm clear from next Wednesday."

"Shit, that's a week today. I don't know if he'll wait."

"It's the earliest I can do it. Monday is out, I've got a full round at the New Central Hospital, and Tuesday is a fundraising ball for the Department of Oncology."

"A hard life, man," I said. "How'd ya stick it?"

"So arrange transfer to the usual account for Wednesday at nine am. Meantime, have you found out anything about our man?"

"I'm working on it."

"Let me know anything I should know. Bye bye Toole."

I called Azelia and told her not to expect me for a few days. We argued. She said Ellis, her five-year-old son, was sick again. What did I know about kids? Our relationship was deteriorating. I didn't know what to say to her.

"So, is it organs? Blood?" I asked Shinehead at the club.

"Not for this guy," Shinehead said, grinning. "He's a buyer for Redell's."

"Redell's? Don't know 'em."

"Americans, been in the city now for three, four years. Hotels, casinos, nightclubs."

"No bells ring."

"Not surprising bro', they gotta front name name for each place, but Redell's is the concern in back. Over there they're big in movies, videos, music. Rumour is, they connected."

"So what exactly did Lundy buy for Redell's?"

"Lundy bought the girls."

"Jesus." That didn't fit the picture I'd built up of Lundy, but first impressions had let me down before. "Jesus."

"So it's simple. He been sampling the goods or more likely indulging in a little creative ripping off."

"Maybe," I said. I didn't think he was, but I didn't tell him that. Shinehead jumped to conclusions. Usually the wrong ones. It was best not to confuse him. I didn't think someone in Lundy's position would need to 'sample the goods', but Shine was right on one point – Lundy had ripped them off.

"So what's the job on this newboy, Avram?" Shine was getting curious.

"Usual, just being cautious," I said. "Listen, you better skid. Check me tomorrow at the club. Keep an eye on Azelia. If she asks, I'm away on business. No calls to Sammy Lee's."

I waited for him to go. He didn't. He sat there with an expectant look on his face.

"What is it?"

"Had an expensive day. Got more people to see tomorrow."

I gave him another two hundred and he went. There had to be something more for Lundy to want this. I'd find it, I'd find it because fifty grand was a great motivator.

"Listen Lundy, you don't have to tell me anything," I said, "but the more I know, the better service I give."

"All I want is the operation," he said, beads of sweat dripping from his chin into his coffee. He mopped his brow with a silk handkerchief. "It's been over a week and you've had half the money. Why the delay?"

"We gotta work out a schedule."

"And every day I'm waiting, they're getting closer."

"Who's they? Lawmen?"

"No questions, please." His voice was shrill.

"Look I'll send Oscar out to get you something to take your mind off –"

"I don't need narcotics, Toole, and I don't need that moron waiting on me hand and foot. I'm not dying, not yet."

"Oscar's doing his best to look out for you. If you told me about these people, then I could take steps."

"What steps?" He sounded hopeful

for a second, then it was gone. "No, there's nothing to do, except wait."

"I'm sorry, guy, but because of the operation's complexity, we gotta take extra precautions. Normally you'da been booked into NCH as a private patient under an alias, but the surgeon wants you at his private clinic in Harley Street. More discreet."

Lundy considered this information. It seemed to calm him. He finished his coffee and left the room. He was right though, time had been wasted. I figured it wouldn't be long till a Redell squad came asking questions. Not to mention the Lawman.

The Redell Corporation had controlling stakes in five Las Vegas Casinos, two Networks and a record company. The top man in Britain was a suit by the name of David Hamsun with a Wall Street background. Lundy, who had three years medical training to his credit and two years studying law, was one of their first recruits this side of the Atlantic.

The dossier Shinehead had built up on Lundy was impressive, but there were no clues as to how he became infected. Everything pointed to a highly conscientious company man. Had a regular girlfriend with a clean card. No drug use, no transfusions and definitely no USFs.

I had Shinehead digging deeper, probing at the health status of the girls Lundy had hired in the last year. So far, he hadn't gleaned much on the inner workings of the Redell organisation, apart from the usual PR bullshit. What Shine had uncovered, were rumours. These rumours had kept me off the street for the last three days, shacked up with Lundy and Oscar.

The door opened soundlessly and Oscar walked in, his graceful steps at odds with his massive bulk. He collected the empty cups and asked if I wanted anything. I asked if he'd heard from his boss.

"Mr Corinth's business abroad will keep him away until the time is right for him to return."

"You mean he won't come back till we've gone?" I said.

"It would be imprudent, Mr Toole," he said, gliding backwards towards the door, not wishing to seem impolite by taking his eyes off me.

I left the house and caught a tram to the Continental Terminal at King's Cross. From there I called Bonaventura and told him Lundy was starting to crack.

"Tell him his problems are over. Have him here at nine on Friday," Freddie said.

I felt the tension drain from my body as I hung up. Elated, I walked briskly back to Gerald Corinth's house on Rochester Place, laughing at the traffic that crawled slowly along College Street easily outpacing it in my eagerness to tell Lundy the news. I jogged up the front steps into the house and found Oscar in a pool of dark blood in the hallway. Clutched in his hands, a Shin Chuo machine pistol pointed uselessly at the ceiling.

I ran quickly through the house, knowing Lundy was gone but checking anyway. I was back in the hall when I heard them at the front door. They were waiting to see who'd come visiting. I fled out the back of the house, over the fence and through the gardens of Gerald Corinth's respectable neighbours, not caring how he'd react to Oscar's death, not even thinking about Lundy, just running and trying not to think of Uzis, bulletholes and blood.

It was gone eight when I called Blades from a public phone. The Lawmen had come visiting, he told me, but it was just your usual, turn the place upside down, raid. Later on, there'd been newboys around, white ones, but they'd asked no questions. They'd stayed for one hour, had a drink and left. Shine had a call two hours ago and had left immediately. I hung up and made my way to the club. Blades ushered me into the back room where some packers were playing dice.

"Who called him, Blades?" I asked, taking a long pull from the brew he'd filled for me.

"Ain't sure, mon, 'im disguise 'is voice see?" Blades said.

"White or black?"

"Check either, Avram, but maybe 'im white," he shrugged his shoulders, his locks dancing around his head.

"Right. I'll stay back here. Anyone comes in, let me know."

I sat with the packers – limb transporters and blood bank raiders who offed candidates who met relevant specs – the trade grunts. They were mostly young and arrogant in a goodnatured way. While I brooded on Shinehead's whereabouts, they cleaned me out.

Around two, Blades came in and said I had a call. I took it behind the bar. Wary.

"Yeah?" I breathed into the mouthpiece.

"It's Shine, I knew them would no get ya, guy, I knew it."

"Shut up," I said. "Where are you?"

"Safe. When Lundy said what went down, I –"

"Lundy's with you?" That was a shock.

"Sure. The big guy saw it was a hit and got him out zippo. He make it?" He meant Oscar.

"No. Lundy's with you now?"

"Yeah man, I said. We in transit, awaiting instructions. I knew them shitfucks wouldn't get you."

"Listen to me Shine. Get him to Dalston, I'll see ya there."

"Done thing, man," Shinehead said.

Three hours later I was in Dalston. Lundy was asleep in the back of the car, sweating profusely. Again.

"It's good to see ya, guy," Shinehead said as he got out of the car.

"Go to the club," I said, maybe too brusquely, but I was tired and I was scared. "Don't go in, just keep your eyes open. Watch for newboys, white ones. Call me here if you see anything."

"What about Lundy's girls?"

"Forget them, just do what I said."

He went. I let myself in the front passenger seat and felt my chest, wondering how long my heart had been pounding that way.

For two days we lived in the Vortex, eating at Burger driveins, our nerves slowly fraying. I wondered if it would make Lundy change his mind.

He'd got out of Corinth's house thanks to Oscar, who had held off the Redell squad for ten minutes, enough time for Lundy to jump a southbound tram and lose himself in the crowd. He didn't know how they'd discovered the safe house. Neither did I. Which meant I could trust no one. I didn't call Shinehead that night, nor the next. I had no intention of talking to anyone except Lundy until I had him safely delivered to the clinic.

The days were murder. We began to

MOGOLLÓN NEWS

by **UNCLE RIVER**
Our New Mexico Correspondent

The Balloon

This past weekend, Armand Tremolo received a visit by his niece, Martina Solari, and her nine children, of Tucson.

Armand, at fifty-seven, has never married. There are no children currently living in Mogollón. Armand is not used to kids. Things generally went okay, however, till Martina realized she had forgotten to bring an extra box of Pampers.

She took the baby with her. The oldest girl, Natalie, rode along too, to get in a talk with her mother. This left Armand with seven children ranging in age from just two to thirteen.

Everything might have been all right if Martina had not made a wrong turn at the highway and ended up driving to Reserve. As it was, she was gone most of the day.

Armand described the experience as being, "Like I was back in Korea. You know, the war nobody mentions except on MASH. Felt like I was surrounded, outnumbered. And they all move so fast!

"First thing Martina was out of sight, Dennise (she's six) says she's hungry. I say, 'How about a cheese sandwich?' She's pleased as can be. I think I'm doing fine. Next thing I know, they all want a cheese sandwich, and there isn't enough cheese to go around. You could have heard the ruckus clear to Mexico.

"By the time I had half of them talked into peanut butter, little Daniel, the two year old, and Steve, who is four, had found the grease gun, a couple of pipe wrenches, a can of nuts and bolts, and a five gallon bucket of flour. I'm not sure if they were making

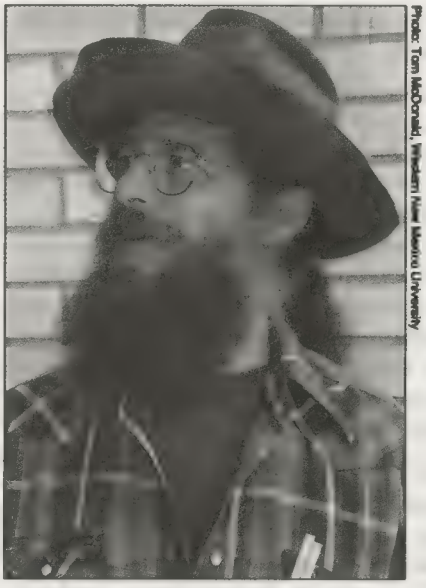


Photo: Tom McDonald, Western New Mexico University

a cake or a rocket ship, but whatever it was supposed to be, it was a big one.

"That's when Billy (he's ten) discovered the balloon. I felt like a prisoner that got reprieved from death — just in time for a riot. It at least caught everyone's attention. Except Cynthia. But she was no problem anyhow, though she wasn't any help either. She just found an old Reader's Digest book of condensed novels and read. A very serious twelve year old that Cynthia.

"I blew up the balloon. Had, 'I like Ike,' printed on it. I batted it to Billy, and he batted it on to Joanne (she's nine). I held my breath waiting to see if she'd squawk or play. She laughed and batted the balloon on to Steve. By then they were all hooked.

"All but Cynthia. She just wanted to know who Ike was, so I told her. Then she went back to her book."

Martina and the kids left Monday morning. Armand has been over at the Bloated Goat Saloon ever since. ✹

hate each other and argued almost continuously. Then there was the traffic; every street I turned into, was torturously slow. I began to hallucinate through sheer frustration. Worst was our fear of Lawmen. When stopped, we told them I was Lundy's chauffeur. You could see the disgust in their eyes when we told them this, disgust at Lundy stooping so low as to employ a black.

Nights were easier. Nights we got drunk and slept through all night shows at the Victoria Park Drive-in. We checked out some bars in Finsbury Park, avoiding Brixton. And all the time, Lundy was deteriorating, slowly caving in. Maybe I was too. All I could think of was that fifty grand. It was eating me.

Friday, I drove to Harley Street. Freddie's two assistants were waiting to usher him inside. Lundy turned as he entered the building, glancing up and down the alley, the fear in his eyes worse than it had ever been. He looked right through me then disappeared inside. It was the last time I saw him white.

I drove east till I hit Palladin, then south to the river. By midday I was out of the city. When I hit Brighton I booked into a sleazepit in the black zone and slept for eighteen hours.

When I woke and had eaten, I drank beer for ten hours then slept for another twelve. I repeated the procedure for one more day, immunising my body against the fear that had been with me since friend Oscar had been holed.

Monday morning I called Shinehead. Things were quiet. No newboys. Oscar's murder had been on the news and the Lawmen were looking for Lundy in connection with the killing. This puzzled Shinehead. I didn't try and explain it to him.

David Hamsun knew his work would be halved if the Lawmen were looking for Lundy, as well as his own squad. It bothered me that they hadn't been back to the club. If they'd managed to trace Lundy to Corinth's house, then they knew about me. Maybe they knew I was out of the city? I put the thought out of my mind and told Shinehead to meet me at the club that evening. I left the sleazepit at midday and drove north, wondering how Lundy was going to cope with his new life.

They were waiting for me at the Centre. Otto Manila, a freelance packer, sat at a table with three pals. He rose as Blades brought my drink over, and followed him to where I was standing.

"Been waiting fe ya, bro," Manila said.

"What you want?"

"A man wanna talk wit' ya," he said. "He bin very patient. T'inks ya bin outta town?"

"Who's this man?"

"Money man fe sure. Wanna talk wit' ya, now." He nodded towards the pals who sat watching us. "We can go quietly, or, fe sure ya know the routine, bro."

I knew the routine but, sometimes, knowing something does not necessarily bestow wisdom. I drove my skull down hard onto the bridge of Otto's nose. A satisfying crack, accompanied by a red spray and a howl of pain, got the pals to their feet and American revolvers in their fists. Looked almost new, as well. I followed the routine then, after they had altered my features some.

All the way to wherever we were going, Otto was insisting that, I was "gonna fucking pay", and that I was his. Keeping a tight lip seemed in order.

In Soho, Otto's driver turned out of the traffic into an underground carpark off Brewer Street. Above it rose the sixty storeys of the Starbeam Hotel. The car descended a while before coming to a halt in a dimly lit corner of the auto-tomb. The pals bundled me out and shoved me towards the lift. The light above the door showed it was coming down. This depressed me.

"Be nice to the man now, bro," Otto said, grinning, his broken nose making him look monstrous.

I was done with Otto so I said nothing until the lift doors hissed open. Three men stepped out and the pals backed off. Otto stood his ground.

"Found 'im fe ya, just like I said," Otto said.

"Pay the nigger, Brubaker," the man in the middle said, brushing imaginary specks of dust from his Armani suit.

The big man on his left took a packet from his overcoat and thrust it at Otto.

Instead of taking it and going, Otto insisted on counting it. "Just to make sure, bro, that's all."

"Why you dumbfuck," Brubaker said, moving towards Otto, but his boss waved a hand, stopping him.

"You should trust us," he said, removing his tortoiseshell glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose. "It's all there, so go. We have business to discuss with this trash."

"Fe sure, bro, wasn't that I didn't trust ya, just didn't want no mistakes, seen?" Otto said, ignoring the man, his eyes totally engrossed on the wad of notes he had splayed out in his fists as he moved away from the lift to where the pals waited.

I had a feeling that Otto had just fucked up in a big way.

"Into the lift, trash," Brubaker said. He was American. His accent seemed exaggerated, as if to emphasise that fact.

I went in. Two of them followed me. The one who had not spoken, a weaselly looking guy in a black tracksuit, disappeared into the shadows. The doors slid shut but the lift didn't move.

"Where is he?" the boss man said. He was younger than me, early thirties, his hair slicked back with gel. He was a big man, athletic, probably worked out two or three times a week. Next to Brubaker, he was a midget.

Brubaker hit me low in the stomach. Three minutes later, when I had managed to get up, Brubaker said: "You got three seconds on each question, fuckbreath, after that, I gotta encourage you some. Unnerstand?"

I understood but I could not speak. That didn't bode well for the interview. I managed to nod my head.

"Where is he?" the boss man repeated.

"Who?" I croaked.

Three minutes later, when Brubaker hauled me upright, he explained: "Deliberate evasiveness will be discouraged, I shoulda pointed that out, I'm sorry."

I forgave him, it wasn't really his fault.

"Look Toole," the boss man went on, "I know every bloody thing there is to know about your operation. I can fuck it up with one simple phone call. However, as you are not a competitor, there is no need for me to do that. All I want to know is the whereabouts of a certain individual who did something he shouldn't have done. We want him before the police get him."

"Mr Shanly here," Brubaker said, "is a tolerant sort of man. I ain't. Talk to him, or I'll rip your Goddamn tongue out."

"What ya wan' know?" I said, slipping into patois.

"Where is Lundy?" Shanly said, smiling, friendly now.

I thought carefully about my answer. The five staccato bursts of machinegun fire that erupted somewhere outside the lift prompted a hurried but stupid reply.

"I dunno."

This time, Brubaker left me on the floor of the lift. I was blind for a minute or two and needed to be sick. I no longer cared about Shanly's questions, I just wanted the pain to end.

"I did know," I said, not looking at either of them. "But you too late, 'im treatment bin completed."

"His new ID then, what is it?" Shanly said.

"Fore you hit me again," I said, looking at Brubaker who seemed keen for me to fuck up again. "You gotta b'lieve me when I say we got nothin' to do with that."

"Who does?" Shanly said.

"Whites got better access to documents an' records."

"Hmmm, I don't know Toole. Can I trust you, that's the question. Of course, if we establish that you cannot be trusted, Brubaker here will break your back. Fair enough?"

"Fine, yeah." It was not fine, but what else could I say. Brubaker's massive fists had a chastening effect on me.

"So here's what you do. Get back on the street and find Lundy. Do that and we may let you live."

I didn't have too many options, so I nodded. My head was still spinning as the doors opened. Brubaker dragged me to a black Jaguar. Along the way we passed Otto and the pals, their twisted bodies full of ragged holes just like Oscar's.

Brubaker took me back to Brixton and dropped me off in Railton Road. At the club Shinehead was shooting pool.

"Hey guy, where ya bin?" he said, taking a seat opposite me.

"Listen Shine," I said, grabbing his arm and yanking him across the table. "How long was Manila here this morning?"

"Don't know Avram, really, I only got here half hour ago."

"You're supposed to protect me from assholes like that, Shine, where the fuck were you?"

"Shit, I had t'ings to tend to."

"Like what?" I said.

"This an inquisition or somethin'?" His eyes flitted warily around the bar.

"How much did they grease you, Shine?"

"Hey now, what you talking 'bout?" he said, standing up.

"Sit down Shine, or so help me I'll off you right here." I had no weapon but my tone of voice convinced him to sit.

"You don' know what you saying," he went on.

"Shut up. I ain't interested, Shine. You succumbed to temptation and now you owe me. You keep whatever they paid you but get out on the street and look for Lundy. Find him, then let me know who and where he is."

"Listen guy, look I'm sorry 'bout ... but look, I'll make it up to ya, you see, I'll –"

"Just go," I cut him off.

I called Freddie from Dalston late that evening. He was upset when I told him what happened. Not upset at the punishment that had been meted out to me, but upset that I had called him.

"Jesus Christ, did they knock your brains out as well?"

"Listen Freddie, sooner or later they'll get to you, no way to avoid it." I paused, wanting him to reflect on that. "But, you can be prepared. They think Lundy's already on the street. Feed them a false set of specs, anything. If you can convince them, then the pressures off."

"Yes, just like you convinced them, eh? Just what the hell did Lundy do to them?"

"I don't know. It's got something to do with his viral status."

"Why not let them have him? We've been paid."

"I don't renege on a deal, and we only got half so far."

"I'm not happy about this Toole, I don't need this aggravation. What about your man Shinehead?"

"I'll deal with him."

"We may have to put our business arrangement on ice. At least until you can employ more reliable people."

"He's a bleeding friend."

"A good one too, no doubt. Get a grip. These people know who you are. How long before the police know too? Think about that. Lundy will be out by the weekend. He says the codes on the outstanding balance will be sent down the line Friday morning. Once you've accessed them, he'll be on his own. As for these Redell people, I can't promise anything."

"Don't worry, just stick to what I said."

I hung up and edged the Vortex towards the street. It took ten minutes to slot into the traffic flowing west along Balls Pond Road. I drove with no real idea of where I was headed. I needed to think. About Lundy. What had he done that had so pissed off Hamsun? It had to be more than money. Had he bought contaminated girls into the organisation? It was a possibility.

In the meantime, I had to figure out what to do about Shine. His betrayal pissed me off but it was no great shock. His real loyalty was to himself. The situation wasn't terminal. The thing to do was to turn him round. I was sure that Otto had greased him. Now Otto and the pals were dead, Shine might begin to see the error of his ways. Shanly and Brubaker would know about him through Otto, and once they saw him out on the street searching for the new, white Lundy, then hopefully, they'd be convinced of my good faith. Otherwise, I was dead.

On Friday morning I keyed in the codes to enable final payment. Once I received confirmation that the money had been transferred, I called Freddie to say Lundy could go. Shanly, Brubaker and the Weasel paid a visit to Freddie the following Monday. They were much more polite with Freddie Bonaventura than they were with me. Brubaker never hit him once. He promised to kill him though, unless Freddie came up with Lundy's new profile.

Freddie did what he thought best. He told them Lundy was black. They took the specs and thanked him for his co-operation. Freddie told me this on Monday evening, adding, I shouldn't be mad. After all, he said, we'd been paid. Disgusted, I hung up and decided that when the time came for my own derm-op, I'd find someone else.

At the end of the week, Shanly and company came for me.

"I did my best for you people," I said in the back of the car, squashed between Brubaker and the Weasel. "I never knew he turned black, man, I did my best."

Shanly in the front passenger seat, turned to me and said: "We know you did, that's why we're extending your contract."

"What contract?"

"The Lundy Contract," he said, staring nonchalantly out at the traffic that had grown even more sluggish in the persistent drizzle. Nobody said another word till we reached the Starbeam Hotel. The weasel stayed in the car with the driver. This time the lift began to climb.

"You're goin' up in the world, fuck-breath," Brubaker said, laughing at his own joke.

The lift stopped and we stepped out. Brubaker prodded me on along a corridor then stood with me while Shanly disappeared inside a room. Two minutes later he opened the door and called us in. I was marched to a desk and pushed down into a seat in front of it. They sat either side of me.

A middle-aged man in a sweat-suit came in through a side door.

"I'm pleased to meet you Mr Toole," he said and stretched his arm across the desk. I didn't move till a nudge from Shanly prompted a response. I shook the man's hand.

"I'm David Hamsun, Mr Toole, though I expect you know that."

"No," I said, "I never heard of you before."

"Come, Toole, there's no need for that. You and I are not enemies." He slid into his seat. His face was tired and worn, his eyes contained no trace of humour. "In our own way we both provide a valued service to the people. If our services were not needed, then neither of us would be in business."

"I'm really grateful for the talk, Mr Hamsun, but look, why don't you tell me

what it is you want," I said. I didn't care any more, I had nothing to offer them.

I felt Brubaker stiffen with potential violence beside me.

A wave of Hamsun's hand and Brubaker relaxed. "Of course, Toole, time is money, I understand. Well, this is what I want from you. I want you to find Lundy for me."

"What?"

"Yes, I'm afraid he's proving rather elusive. But you Toole, are black. Without wishing to dwell on that unfortunate aspect of your being, it seems obvious that one who has made a success of himself given that factor, would have ways and means of finding out about new faces in, shall we say, the ghetto?"

"Newboys we call 'em, not new faces. I don't understand, why should I do this for you?"

"It ain't for you to understand, fuckbreath," Brubaker said.

"No, Brubaker, Mr Toole has a right to know." Hamsun rose to his feet. "Come with me please."

I followed him to the side door. A short corridor led us to another lift. We went up two floors to his penthouse apartment. I followed him through to a room off the lounge. It reminded me of Bonaventura's clinic, or at the NCH. On the bed in the middle of the room, a woman lay unconscious, tubes and wires sprouting from various parts of her body. A nurse sat in a chair on the far side of the bed.

"This is my wife," Hamsun said and his voice was a choked whisper. "Lundy did this to her."

I stared at his wife. Her skin was pale, almost translucent, her hair grey and her body emaciated, her respiration weak. I wondered why Hamsun had married this old woman and then I saw the truth, even before he enlightened me.

"She will be dead soon. Thirty-three is no age to die. He gave her this disease. I can forgive her grubby affairs, these things happen, sometimes they are useful, I can even forgive Lundy, but not for giving her this, for his Unsafe Fucks. It wasn't enough he was ripping me off – one makes allowances, but killing her was going too far."

"I'm sorry," I said and I was, but I sensed there was more. "Why don't you just let it kill Lundy? He can't have long."

"Perhaps not, but you see, Toole, I want to be certain that he goes before I do," he said and turned and left the room.

In the office, his voice once again under control, Hamsun said: "Find Lundy for me and I'll pay you fifty thousand pounds. You have one month, then Mr Brubaker will come looking for you."

Brubaker smiled, relishing the thought.

I put the word out that I was looking for a newboy and waited to see what would come back. I acquired a Walther 9mm for Shinehead and told him to learn how to use it. I told him to watch my back and nothing else.

We were shooting dice at the club, a week or more after I'd seen Hamsun. Blades called me to the phone.

"Toole?" the voice said. "I hear you been asking after me?"

"Could be a talk might be worth both our whiles, Mr ...?"

"Oh, you can call me Sonny, most folks do. How you doin' down there in Brixton?"

"Fine. I need to talk to ya. Sort out some loose ends."

"Yeah? What you saying man? Hamsun still after me?"

"There's some things I need to know. You remember that place in Dalston? Be there tonight at nine."

"Hey man, that might not be possible, I gotta schedule, see. I don't know if I trust you."

"You got nothing to fear from me, Sonny."

"Yeah? Guess I'll soon know, huh?" He hung up. I called Shinehead and he followed me out on to the street.

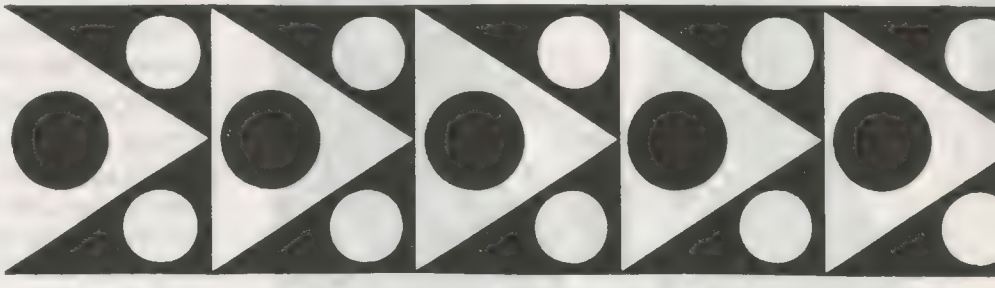
"Tomorrow morning," I said as we walked east towards Brixton Road. "Go to Dalston and punch these codes into the computer." I gave him a set of figures. "Wipe these accounts and transfer the balance to these new numbers. I'm trusting you to do this, Shine. See me back here tomorrow afternoon."

Shinehead smiled to show the job was as good as done, then walked back towards the club, leaving me waiting for a tram.

At the lock-up, Lundy was waiting. He wore wire-rim mirrors to hide the tissue scarring around his eyes. In the muted streetlight, his restructured cheekbones and puffy lips looked almost normal. His hair had been pleated into dreadlocks and he seemed to have gained an inch in height. Elevators in his Gucci trainers. He wore black jeans and a black and pink ski jacket with a gold chain round his neck. He was trying too hard.

"How ya doin' bro'?" he asked and gave me the shake. I didn't tell him he was an anachronism – someone else would, soon enough.

In the car we discussed how things were going. He already had a couple of angles worked out. Narcs was ripe for fresh input, he said. He'd made some good contacts and his only problem was payments for the Lawman.



I said nothing about his plan. I didn't want to shatter his illusions. Narcotics was for the corporations. What money was in it, they wanted for themselves. The risks were few and they already owned the Lawman. Body bagging, organs, blood running – these were the bones the corporations left for us to chew on – high risk scams, where you had more chance of catching a dose of viral death than making a packet, where you always had blood on your hands, your black hands.

Some among us espoused a doctrine: we should purify our bodies and minds, make ourselves strong and wait for the

day when the corporations were so stoned they wouldn't see us taking our slice of the pie; so we stopped taking dope, not just because we wanted to be strong, but because we could no longer afford the habit. We would get rich off the underside of the Corporations, then get the derm-job, sign on the white line and start to live. Only it was everybody for themselves and there was no one for Lundy. Soon I'd make a call and he'd be dead.

As if sensing my imminent betrayal, Lundy said:

"What you really wan' from me, bro?"

"Why'd'ya do it, Sonny?" I still wanted to hear his side.

"Man, she was Hamsun's squeeze an' she was beautiful. I knew the risk but you don' turn her down or she gonna stitch you up." He took out a joint and lit it.

"So you didn't use anything?"

"Listen bro, wit' a squeeze like that, you don' think you're dealing wit' a third party. For me, it weren't unsafe. It was, but those were her bugs, man."

"She must have insisted on using something," I said.

"Why man? She seen my status, she know I was clean. 'Sides, what she care who she give it to."

"Wait now, you saying she was carrying? She loaded you?"

"I see you been spun the party line, bro. That's why you wanted to see me, ain't it? Hamsun's talked to you?"

A worm of guilt crawled into my mind. "You know about him?"

"You think that's a surprise? Man, that was a certainty. Why you think he wants me dead so bad. Reckons I killed him, bro, but he was loaded 'fore I ever went near her, only he din't have himsel' tested. What fer? He's a rich man, he don' need to fuck around wit' no contaminated shit."

"He's very determined, Lundy."

"Don't call me that name," Lundy said, bitterly. "You seen the man and you taking his money now."

"That's not how it is, Sonny."

"Fuck you," he said, getting out of the car. He stubbed his joint out against the wing, then leaned back in the open door. "You done me a favour, bro, now I guess you gonna do one for him. We all gotta do what conscience dictates. Yours say, sell Sonny, then do it." He strolled away to the end of the alley, his body adapting to an alien rhythm, swaying in the silver street-light. He stopped at the main street and looked both ways, rounded the corner to his right and was gone. I never saw him again.

"Where you bin," Azelia said that night. "You don't come round for near a month, then stick yo' head roun' the door, just' like dat. Ain't good enough, Avram."

I closed my mind to her and went through to the living room and switched on the tv. She followed me.

"This s'posed to be relationship? It fool me fer a start. Now look, you woke Ellis." She left the room to tend her son who had started crying in his bedroom. I listened to her soothing words,

feeling nothing. The relationship had fooled me as well, but no more. It had stagnated, become a habit which neither of us could break. Like all habits, it was damaging. I was going to kick it then, soon as the time was right.

She came back into the room, carrying the child. "See what you done to your boy?"

"He's not my kid, Azelia," I said, wearily. "We've been through this before."

"You bin through it, I ain't. When you took me on Avram, you knowed I had him. You gettin' bored now, scared a responsibility, you scum, boy, cos you got no loyalty to no one 'cept yo'self."

I went to bed. She had no right to say those things to me, even if they were true. If I did owe her something, then an op for her and Ellis would clear the debt as far as I was concerned.

At midday I went up to Dalston and checked the computer. All the accounts were empty, including the new ones. I punched in an override command, directing it to tell me where the money was. It whirred, then the screen flatlined and went blank; phosphor dots stormed the screen and it stayed that way. Booby-trapped. I rang the Rio Negres.

"Shinehead? Him ain't bin in all morning," Blades told me.

"Fine, forget it for now," I said and went to Harley Street.

For three days I staked out Freddie Bonaventura's clinic. The weather was turning cold and a persistent drizzle fell, soaking my Crombie. I watched from across the street, knowing he would show up. And on the third evening, he did.

I rang Hamsun from the Centre that evening. Shanly took the call.

"You found him?" he said.

"Yeah."

"Where?"

"I wanna talk to Hamsun."

"That's not possible," he said, laughing softly. "There's been a bereavement. Mrs Hamsun. We'll take care of Lundy. Mr Hamsun would prefer it that way. So, where is he?"

"I'll call you soon," I said.

"What are you playing at?"

"Plenty time, Shanly," I said, enjoying his mute rage. "You wait by the phone and you won't miss my call." I hung up.

The next day I opened a new account for Avram Toole and put a hundred pounds in there. Then I called Shanly.

"Friday morning I'll give you an address where he'll be. I won't call till the money's lodged in this account." I gave him the number. "Soon as I see it there, I'll call."

"Wait a minute, Toole, what sort of operation do you think this is? We are not –"

"I don't care a fuck what you are," I said. "If the fifty grand isn't there by ten Friday morning, then you in shit with your boss." I put the phone down and went back to Freddie's in case of an early discharge.

I checked the account Friday at nine forty. It was done. I rang Shanly from Harley Street and told him where I was waiting. Thirty minutes later the Jaguar drew up beside me. I sat in the back beside Shanly. Brubaker and the Weasel were in the front.

"I put the word out that I was looking for a newboy, a black one," I said. "I had a hunch."

"A fucking hunch, Jeez," Brubaker said, disgusted. He glared his hatred at me in the rear view mirror.

"Shut up," Shanly told him. "What are you saying, Toole?"

"I wanted him to know that you know he's black."

"I see," he said. "He came back to Bonaventura. I guess you used your head this time. Gentlemen," he turned to the two in front, "Mr Lundy will be with us shortly."

Anger bloomed inside me while we waited. Even if it was only revenge, I was still happy. I could wait all day. He came out after fifteen minutes.

He wore a grey Italian suit, a matching trilby and a pair of mirrors. He smiled at the top of the steps as he gazed up and down Harley Street. I could tell by the way he clutched the leather briefcase beneath his arm, he was confident that what was in there would guarantee him a piece of corporate pie.

Brubaker and the Weasel got out and sauntered through the slow moving traffic. Even when they sidled up to him, he didn't see it. He cracked his stupid black grin on his new white lips and made some joke. Only when a Mauser was placed against his chest and another was rammed through the mirrors into his left eye, did Shinehead's smile fade. Crimson jets erupted silently from his head and back. Brubaker and the Weasel were halfway across the street before the body hit the ground.

Rumours. Even after ten months I hear them. They say that Lundy is still out there, hustling in his own small-time way. No one says he is dying. They only speak of his fedora with the diamond studded headband and the gold that hangs from his neck and none of them know it is only a noose.

An acquaintance put me in touch with a Swedish doctor in Finchley a while back. I set things up for Azelia and the kid but when I told her, she told me to stick it, said if she was born white then that was fine, only she wasn't and she wasn't chasing after no dream like Avram Toole. She had her pride, she said and didn't try to stop me when I moved out.

Some stupid sense of loyalty stops me from getting the operation while he's alive. I watch the news bulletins every night and scan the papers every morning for a piece on the death of a two-bit narc hustler. It should be reported somewhere, if only for its curiosity value. Sometimes I imagine the autopsy: those people peeling back that black flesh and discovering him beneath. What would Hamsun say if he found out? He would say nothing. He is dead. Lundy's life or death is of no value to anyone. Except me, because it holds me here in the black.

I've opened a new account for Anthony Sturgeon while I've been waiting. He, at least, understands my predicament, understands why I must wait. He has waited for thirty-five years to be born. Another one or two makes no difference. ❑

Mike O'Driscoll made his **BBR** debut with "Sailor on the Sea of Tranquility" in issue #16. His stories have appeared in *Works* and *Fear*, with more coming up in *Auguries* and elsewhere. He lives in Swansea, where he runs a video shop.

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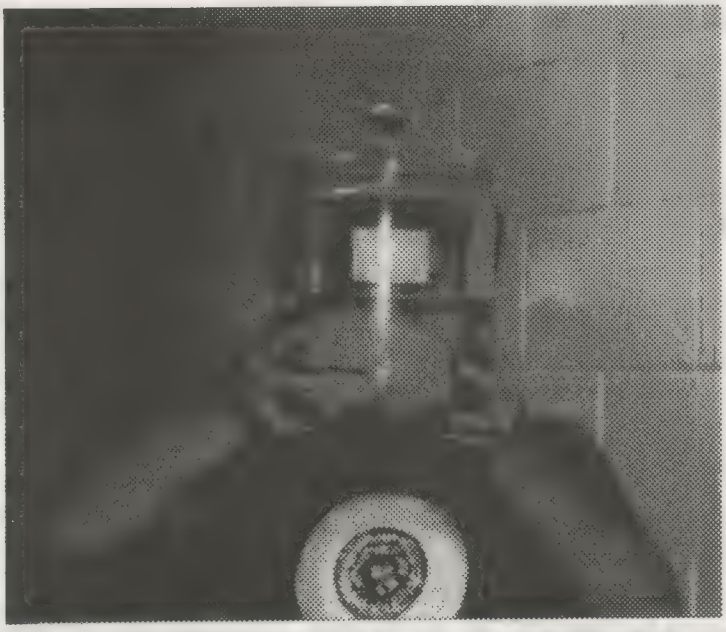

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National Inquirer **666**

This, I say, this is a joke, son, that is, a funny! A parody, don't you know! (Kid's 'bout as sharp as a bowlin' ball.)

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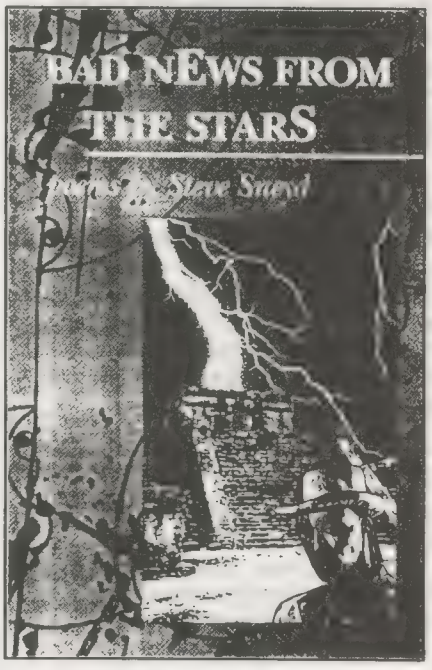
Breathtaking visions

SHORT CIRCUITS by Bruce Boston
BAD NEWS FROM THE STARS by Steve Sneyd

Ocean View, ISBN 0 938075 16 0. 88pp paperback, $9:95 from Ocean View Books, Box 4148, Mountain View, CA 94040, USA (£5 from Andy Richards, Cold Tonnage Books, 136 New Road, Bedfont, Feltham, Middx TW14 8HT)



It's not hard to see why Bruce Boston has won the Rhysling Award on three occassions, and twice been chosen Best Poet of the Year by the Small Press Writers and Artists Organization. Nearly 500 poems and 70 short stories have already been published, and his work currently appears in the Nebula Awards, *Year's Best Fantasy* and *Year's Best Horror* anthologies.

Boston's latest collection, *Short Circuits*, which with Steve Sneyd's *Bad News from the Stars* forms the second volume in the Ocean View Doubles series, again demonstrates why he is widely considered to be the leading contemporary poet in the fields of science fiction and horror.

The works presented here do not come in verse, but use the prose form laden with poetic sensation and imagery, ranging from quirky Webb-like leaps of imagination to Damon-esque mysticism and twilight nightmare. All are highly literate, and many – such as "In the Eyes of Old Dogs" and "One Way Street" – are breathtaking in their immediacy.

Flip the book over and you have *Bad News from the Stars* by Steve Sneyd, one of the popular 'Yorkshire Triumvirate' (Simon Clark and Andrew Darlington are likewise no strangers to these pages) and to my mind the only British poet to equal Bruce Boston both in volume and quality of output, and in breadth of scope and theme.

It is characteristic of Sneyd's verse that there is as much meaning in what *isn't* stated as there is in the words on the page. Such economy means the success of each piece depends strongly on how the reader makes the connections and fills in the gaps, but such is Sneyd's acumen that he subtly guides you to the right conclusion with stunning regularity. The added bonus is of course that the poems yield yet more treasures with subsequent readings, making this collection something you'll want to keep going back to.

At the moment, a great deal of SF poetry merely renders material that would normally seem routine into verse form. In contrast, Boston and Sneyd use the inherently poetic elements of SF as their building blocks to create their own new worlds and visions. As a result, this book stands out by a mile, and should belong in the library of any self-respecting reader of poetry and prose alike. ❑

THE TIME-LAPSED MAN and other stories
by Eric Brown

Drunken Dragon, ISBN 0 947578 03 X. 216 pages hardback, £13:50

This first collection by Eric Brown brings together his five earliest contributions to *Interzone*, plus one from *Opus* and two new stories seen here for the first time.

Most of the stories are set in a 21st-century society where telepathy is a pivotal attribute. Navigators use it to guide spaceships through the '*nada*-continuum' of hyperspace, private detectives use it to trace kidnap victims, and troubleshooters use it to apprehend rogue androids. Elsewhere, artists employ a variant of telepathy in the form of memory crystals to create works of art from their emotions.

Individually, the stories demonstrate Brown's impeccable skills as a storyteller. His characters are well-handled, be they male or female, adult or adolescent, european, asian or negroid. His plots are highly crafted, coming together with a sense of completeness, and his style of narrative is fast, hip and streetwise, and intensely readable. It's no surprise that he's popular with readers, and with editors.

"The Time-Lapsed Man" is by far the most powerful story in the collection. Because it's the first in the book, it's the most demanding, being the first to present the reader with the concept of the flux/telepathy environment, and how that environment shapes the behaviour of its inhabitants.

The following story, "The Karma Kid Transcends", is also based in the flux/telepathy environment. However, much of the basic explanation that was needed to present this story in isolation is now redundant, and serves only to clutter the narrative. As a result the effect of "Karma Kid" is blunted, and the same occurs with all the other stories using this megatext.

Other trends appear when reading the stories collectively. Despite their varied backgrounds, all the characters essentially are seeking some form of spiritual peace, a coming to terms with their guilt or sense of loss. Faced with the prospect of never being able to flux again, "The Time-Lapsed Man" finally regains his euphoric one-ness with the infinite nada in death; confronted with an unscreened view of basic human hatred and selfishness, Brown's telepathic heroines finally find genuine love and affection; an artist makes death her ultimate masterpiece; and so on. Once again, the quest for atonement is a powerful and emotive theme in the first story, but to repeatedly beg the reader's sympathy for this situation is ultimately too demanding.

Similarly, the style also tends to pall.

Although there's murder, rape and necrophilia in here, they create no revulsion in the reader. There's nothing sordid, no grime, no body odour or pubic hair. His impeccable plotting skill and repeatedly tight construction makes the endings seem to be tied up so neatly you can almost see the pink ribbon. At least once in a while it would be nice to leave the reader with some doubt or other means of interaction.

Now, don't get me wrong, I've nothing against tidy and well-rounded stories. If you like this type of fiction then don't bother to read the rest of this review: just go out and buy this book *now* because you'll thoroughly it. End of story.

However, when stories written for individual presentation – and highly-acclaimed in that environment – are subsequently pulled together for an anthology, there is a very serious danger that, without due care and attention, the cumulative effect will simply cancel the stories out rather than create an even greater whole.

And that, unfortunately, is what happens here.

In that respect, the most successful stories after "The Time-Lapsed Man" itself are those which have not been previously published, for they bring a freshness to the collection by suggesting a departure from the familiar flux/telepathy environment.

The protagonist of "Pithecanthropus Blues" is another Engineman who suffers a rare disease as a result of excessive fluxing, but here his regression occurs in the form of 'Ancestral Persona Exchange' – displacement into the time and body of the proto-human ancestor genetically invoked during flux to drive the spaceship. Although a little forced, the humour of the story – 'Ancestral Persona Exchange' becomes 'APE', a 'cyberpunch' cocktail is 'a Gibson with helium' – is a welcome change of tone.

The other new story, "The Inheritors of Earth", continues the ape-man theme, but also introduces a completely new environment set in Victorian England. It is written in the first person as are all his other stories, but takes the form of progressive journal entries in the contemporary style, and great care has obviously been taken with language and manner. Wells-ian time machines and a quest to save the Neanderthals from extinction by the forebears of modern man.

Though by no means the best-crafted stories on offer, these new works do hint at some of Eric Brown's potential. That the rest of the collection otherwise highlights so much sameness in his early work is again due to a lack of editorial awareness.

It is a great pity that this collection only skims the surface of Eric Brown's talent, for without doubt he has the potential to become a writer of phenomenal standing. I'm looking forward to the time when he really spreads his wings. ❑

PLANE OF PEACE
by Ray Jon

A5, 32pp, £1:25 from Ray Jon, Rurik, Ormesby Road, Hemsby, Great Yarmouth, NR29 4LA

Back in the days when **BBR** used to publish poetry, Ray Jon was one of our most reliable contributors, with hardly an issue not featuring his verse. Some of the poems we published then are reprinted in his second collection, together with work that first appeared in *Works, Krax, Pennine Ink* and elsewhere.

Some of the rhyming verse in the more lighthearted pieces reads a little forced in places, but for his more serious pieces Ray Jon employs the free form to devastating effect. "Passenger" and "The Girls in Summer Dresses" are still as potent as when they first appeared, but "Helen", "Tigress" and "Ignition" are equally fine examples of Jon's uncanny ability to pinpoint emotion; "Noddy", "Cabbage" and "Wings" show his characteristic handling of the more general themes of hope and escape with similarly satisfying results.

Ray Jon is a perceptive and eloquent poet, and his skills are amply demonstrated in this collection. A fitting successor to *First Poems, Plane of Peace* will be enjoyed by those already familiar with his work, as well as winning him new fans and wider exposure. ❑

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AUGURIES #13

A5, 72pp, £1:75 (4/£7) from N. Morton, 48 Anglesey Road, Alverstoke, Gosport, Hants PO12 2EQ

Following the success of issues #9 and #10 on a 'Time' theme, editor Nik Morton offers the latest *Auguries* grouped loosely under 'The Arts'. The nine stories here accordingly range through the static and performing arts, from ballet and opera, to painting and writing, film and TV, and even a blues guitarist.

However, whereas Time prompted the story *ideas* in the earlier theme issues, the difference here is that the Arts essentially provide the *settings* for the stories. In Kevin Lyons' "Aria", for example, the assassin hired to kill a leading opera singer finds his gun seeking different targets; in the two stories by Marise Morland, a ballet dancer is caught in an other-world reality by the new special effects of her latest production, and a jilted neuro-singer exerts a novel revenge on her former lover.

Although some of the stories are new treatments of well-known themes, such as Liz Honeywill's "Touch and Go" and Ty Power's "Spaceman Blues", others are refreshingly off-beat and inspired. This particularly includes "Certificate 40" by D.F. Lewis, a strange and darkly disconcerting tale, and Andy Smith's account of a near-blind painter who brings new faith to an alien race.

With only the High Magick of Andy Sawyer's "On The Island" seeming out of place in the 'Arts' context, this issue hangs together well at the concept level. With more theme issues in the pipeline for 1991, it looks as if Nik Morton has chosen a productive and fruitful path for the future development of this magazine. ❑

DWORN STORM #1

A5, 24pp, 50p from Gavin Ross, 2 Gainford Avenue, Linthorpe, Middlesborough, Cleveland TS5 7RF

Dworn Storm is both written and drawn by Gavin Ross, and marks his comics debut. The story concerns the adventures of a young family in the barren mythical world of Dworn Storm, and though this issue contains only the first two chapters, there is a distinct impression that the story will build in complexity and theme as it progresses.

Gavin's artwork is crisp and clear, and though sometimes the style seems inconsistent, his use of line and design are impressive. My only quibble is that the lettering is unclear in places, especially compared to the beautiful calligraphy of the introduction. Nonetheless, future issues of *Dworn Storm* will be worth looking out for, as well as Gavin's work coming up in *Nightfall*. ❑

MEMES #4

A5, 48pp, £2 (3/£5) from Norman Jope, Flat 10, Sinclair Court, Park Road, Mosely, Birmingham B13 8AH

At the interface of culture and occulture, *Memes* brings verse, prose and essays for the enlightened of both sects.

Esoteric currents in the Fin-de-siècle, the artist as shaman and the creative alchemy of Verlaine and Rimbaud are applied across the arts to music and painting by A.C. Evans.

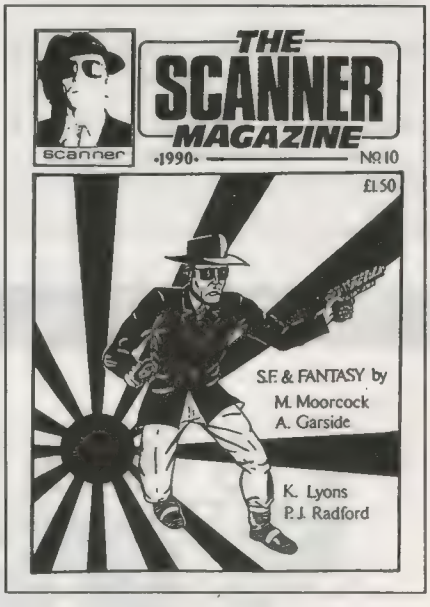
Thomas Wiloch examines *The Morning of the Magicians*, the book published in 1960 which inspired Von Däniken's theories of god-as-spaceman, and also provoked a whole rash of books on the occult and satanic motivations of the

Zero hour!

THE SCANNER #10

A4, 24pp, £1:50 (4/£5:50) from Chris James, 4,Dover Road, East Cowes, Isle of Wight PO32 6RG

One of *The Scanner*'s most enduring features is the continuing adventures of Johnny Zero, the rock-star turned maverick secret agent whose fedora and mirror-shades provide the magazine's distinctive logo.



Picking up from episodes in earlier *Scanners*, this special Johnny Zero issue presents three new stories in the series, one by Kevin Lyons and Paul Leone, and two by Alan Garside.

In a familiar near-future scenario of a war-torn Europe under US occupation, with rioting and political unrest around the world, Zero the (anti)-hero and his band The Terminal Beach cause havoc in Tokyo, disrupt the commercial exploitation of a benefit gig on the moon and dodge Dutto bombs for a comeback appearance at the Hammersmith Odeon.

'G.E.N. TV News Headlines' intersperse the fiction, adding background flavour and augmenting the scenario, together with reviews of Terminal Beach albums and films.

In the past, critics have dismissed Johnny Zero as nothing more than a Jerry Cornelius ripoff, but this is rather shortsighted. There is certainly a common foundation in entropic decay and political unrest, but Johnny Zero fiction has so far avoided the complex metaphor of Moorcock's creation. However, the tongue-in-cheek way in which Zero muddles his way through his assignments perhaps owes more to the Jerry Cornell character in *The Chinese Agent* and *The Russian Intelligence* than it does to Cornelius himself.

If anything *The Scanner* acknowledges the influence of Moorcock with an appraisal of *The Lives and Times of Jerry Cornelius*, Terminal Beach reviews by one James Colvin, and new verse by Moorcock himself.

Yet despite his dubious roots, it is clear that Johnny Zero is steadily taking on a life of his own. As other writers beside Lyons and Garside take up the Zero mythos as well, the characters and worldviews will flesh out further still and Johnny Zero's adventures will spread to other magazines.

Even then, *The Scanner* will always be home to Johnny Zero, and in this special Johnny Zero edition we have the best of the magazine so far. To coin a phrase, "Vive le Scanner!"

Dan O'Halloran ❑

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Third Reich. Using the same investigative sleight-of-hand as its authors Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier, Wiloch draws some startling conclusions about the book's purpose as a recruiting text for authoritarian cults like the Moonies and Scientologists.

And interleaved with full pages of Lynda Stevens' visionary art and Dave Grimbleby's acid-warp mosaics, we find semiotic flash-gun poems by Tim Van Der Kroon, Rick Alancroft and Hilary Hayes; from David Miller, Stuart Field and Misha, prose that is potent in its lack of excess.

Lean, fit and muscle-packed with meaning, *Memes* stands out as the quintessence of the small press counterculture. ❑

perCHANCE #3

A5, 36pp, 70p from Jim Johnston, 44 Hillcrest Drive, Doagh Road, Newtownabbey, Co Antrim BT36 6EQ

I immediately warmed to this new RPG magazine, even though my knowledge of role-playing is near-zero. It's a well laid out and attractive production, with snazzy line art in the Judge Dredd style from Paul Holden, Bob Cocoran and Andrew Pancott accompanying the assorted articles.

Particularly appealing to my quirky sense of humour is the lengthy elaboration of a new scenario dubbed "CthulhuPunk" - that's right, hybridising the worlds of *Call of Cthulhu* and *Cyberpunk*. Drawing on Gibson's use of voodoo myths in *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*, Darren Graham details how the supernatural elements of the Cthulhu Mythos can be incorporated into a society of high-tech corporate espionage, building an interesting and thoughtful scenario in the process.

Some of the other articles are too technical for the casual reader: "Alternative Cyberpunk Character Generation" and the "New Rules for Hit Locations in *Living Steel*" left me baffled.

Entertaining short fiction by Jonathan Turner, and Paul Holden's strip for "CthulhuPunk" round off this issue.

With loads of RPG ideas and suggestions, *perChance* admirably demonstrates that innovation and creativity are not the exclusive domain of fiction writers. ❑

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A varied magazine which reflects the broad spectrum of SF, leaning towards the experimental.

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THE SKEPTIC Vol 4 #6

A4, 32pp, £1:60 (6/£10) from The Skeptic, PO Box 475, Manchester M60 2TH

It's often said that reality is stranger than fantasy. To judge from some of the phenomena reported in the media that's probably true, as Uri Geller and UFOs have been replaced in the public eye by reincarnation and crop circles.

But for anyone who abhors the *deus ex machina* in fiction as a lazy way of resolving a story, then attributing these real life phenomena to the super- or paranormal ranks on much the same scale of credibility. After all, there is so much yet to be discovered about the world we live in, before we resort to 'other worlds' to explain the unknown.

The role of skeptics is to suggest alternative explanations of the paranormal by means of conventional science, and assess the efficacy of pseudoscience through controlled experiment and investigation.

In this issue of *The Skeptic*, accordingly, Michael Heap offers a clinical psychologist's opinion of past life regression under hypnosis, and Pat Kehoe suggests thirteen hazards of New Age thinking.

It's not a case of selfrighteously pointing out fatal flaws in the arguments of others, however, or simply presenting a diametrically opposed point of view, but rather to offer new thoughts and interpretations in a lively and informative fashion. Andrew Belsey asks whether it's reasonable for Christian fundamentalists to believe in occult demonology, whilst John Clarke writes as someone who has dabbled in scientology for more than 14 years.

Other articles are more general, providing interesting background to the subject: Roger Ford describes Ray Palmer's contribution to popular ufology, through his promotion of Richard Shaver's 'saucer-flying Deros from Inner Earth' mythos in *Amazing Stories* magazine in the 1940s; meanwhile Bill Penny recounts how 'Polywater' was the cold fusion of the 1960s.

There's also a round-up of stories from the international press, and skeptical reviews of recent publications. Feedback and readers' comments bring this issue to a close.

Although written mainly by scientists, you don't need a degree in psychology or applied nuclear physics to understand what's going on in *The Skeptic*. It's a well-written and informative magazine, and one I hope to see more of again soon. ❑

FACTSHEET FIVE #39

A4, 144pp, $3 from Mike Gunderloy, 6 Arizona Avenue, Rensselaer, NY 12144-4502, USA

If ever proof was needed of the strength and vigour of independent publishing, then look no further than *Factsheet Five*.

Each issue of this magazine carries more than 500 reviews of alternative, independent and privately published magazines, with titles this time ranging from *Twin Peaks Observer* "it was bound to happen and yes, here it is – the fansheet for TV's latest craze" and *Men Talk* "news from a bunch of men trying to work together on things like self-understanding and spiritual growth" through to *Strong Coffee* "unbelievable! Not only is the Chicago area loaded with cafes and coffee lovers, there's even a zine about them" and *Thanateros* "the only journal for Chaos Magickians on this side of the Atlantic".

Not only does the unsuspecting browser get hooked into a strange and hypnotic journey through American subculture, but there's a whole load of goods coming in from the UK, Holland, Belgium, Australia and elsewhere, proving that it's not only Americans who can break through the apathy barrier to do something positive about things they care strongly about.

Pro wrestling, Vietnam veterans and European trash cinema get equal space alongside politics, ecology, fashion and music, though editor Mike Gunderloy kindly indicates titles reviewed for the first time in *Factsheet Five*, and offers distinct review sections for books, music zines, comics, poetry, videos, audio cassettes, spoken word, calendars, t-shirts and miscellaneous artifacts like buttons, stickers, armbands, Moebius strips ... And as if that wasn't enough for your money, there are regular columns including "Why Publish?", "Marginalia" (this issue Hakim Bey on Cop Culture), fiction from Misha, and a lively correspondence column.

So you're thinking, 'Okay, this is a pretty cool zine, it tells me where to get the things I'm interested in reading'. But it's when you realise that *Factsheet Five* is reviewing 500-plus magazines *every two months*, that it suddenly hits you just how big the groundswell of independent publishing really is.

It beats me how Mike Gunderloy stays on top of the phenomenal workload, let alone keeps adding new features and sections as he does, but the regularity of the magazine means the information is rarely out of date, and makes *Factsheet Five* the essential reference journal for independent and small press publications. ❑

SCIENCE FICTION EYE #7

A4, 100pp, $3:50 (3/$10) from Science Fiction Eye, PO Box 43244, Washington, DC 20010-9244, USA (£3 or 4/£11 from the NSFA)

It's no coincidence that *SF Eye* won the Readercon Small Press Awards in 1990 for Best Magazine Design as well as Best Magazine Criticism, for the quality of its articles is backed up by a standard of presentation that many professional magazines would be hard pressed to match.

This issue has a particular slant on feminism in science fiction, featuring as centrepoint a three-way interview with Pat Murphy, Lisa Goldstein and Karen Joy Fowler, conducted by Wendy Counsil. Though the conversation touches on female v. feminist writers, and female editors v. male domination of the awards and bestsellers, the points made are not knee-jerk reactions to sexual politics, but pertinent and intelligent observations on the way the business is run as a whole.

Also top of the bill is Takayuki Tatsumi's wideranging interview with Connie Willis, which devotes a substantial section to the background and conception of her controversial 'alien sex' short story "All My Darling Daughters". A rather different interpretation is offered in the following article by Lucy Sussex and Yvonne Rousseau who, in examining the story's parallels with *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*, also highlight some serious implications about incest and animal abuse that appear not to have concerned Willis when she wrote the story.

It's the support acts however who provide the most enjoyable entertainment in this issue of the *Eye*. Paul Di Filippo uses his "Terminal Lunch" column this time to discuss the work of Kathy Acker; not only does he show an amazing knowledge and appreciation of her books, but he writes in emulation of her style – complete with eccentric: (punctuation) – making this article an stunning creation in its own right.

Elsewhere, Misha talks to V. Vale and Andrea Juno of *RE/Search*. They provided Jonathan Ross with the raw material for his *Incredibly Stange Film Show* with *RE/Search* #10; their latest issue, *Modern Primitives*, is currently at the centre of a censorship row in Britain, with copies seized recently from Fantasy Inn in London on account of its detailed pictorial documentation of tattooing, scarification and piercings. It's hardly surprising therefore that Juno and Vale are the subject of infinitely more intense paranoia from the US moral majority. Even so, they are remarkably level-headed about the issue, and their comments on originality and creativity make this piece one of the most stimulating and entertaining in the magazine.

Contributions from Bruce Sterling, Lucius Shepard and Kathe Koja round off this issue, together with the regular book reviews and an increasingly heated letters column (Peter Lamborn Wilson and Orson Scott Card nigh coming to blows over Card's story "The Lost Boys" – Wilson calls Card "The Mormon Babykiller", Card calls Eyeditor Steve Brown "a merchant of hate").

After cutting its teeth on the cyberpunk phenomenon, *SF Eye* seemed in danger of being pulled under with the crumbling corpse. Fortunately for the rest of us, the *Eye* has managed to shrug off the c-punk mantle and turn its attention to other topics with equal insight and panache, as this issue's content demonstrates. ❑

SEMIOTEXT(E) SF #14
edited by Peter Lamborn Wilson, Rudy Rucker & Robert Anton Wilson

Autonomedia, ISSN 0 093 95779/ ISBN 0 936756 43 8. 384pp paperback from Semiotext(e), 522 Philosophy Hall, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, USA

This beast has the heft of one of those old cloth-bound bibles and the contributors list reads like a who's who of cool SF. Naturally no self-respecting fan will be able to hold his/her head up in the 90s without having read it. But is it as shocking as it makes out?

Well ...

Semiotext(e) is an American magazine that takes a different subject for each issue and aggressively dives in. Previous issues have been subtitled 'Ego Traps', 'Polysexuality', 'Nietzsche's Return' ... you get the drift. They've tackled SF from their customary anarchist viewpoint, so it's not exactly your typical anthology. The editors, judging by the introduction, expect the whole exercise to be taken with a pinch of salt. At the time of writing this review, the government is running around like a headless chicken, the economy is knackered, and a devastating foreign war beckons. Survive this, and you'll catch AIDS or go down with the dying biosphere. No-one's going to be upset by a collection of SF. This seems to have surprised a few people: 'I wasn't in the least bit shocked by *Semiotext(e)* – in fact, I found it a bit childish.' Gee, how macho!

Anyway, the anthology kicks off strongly with a Don Webb Metamorphosis (#89), a mean little tale of redneck centaur hunters.

Following hard on this is a powerful story from Bruce Sterling depicting an Islamic world order. "We See Things Differently" contains one of the best depictions of a rock concert in fiction.

There's a wad of stuff from the other cyberpunks as well. Gibson's "Hippy Hat Brain Parasite" is pretty lightweight, but "Six Kinds of Darkness" is John Shirley at his best (I'm going to run out of clichés for superlatives in this review). It's also a reprint. The only other reprint that I spotted was Ballard's "Report On An Unidentified Space Station", which originally appeared in *Lands of Never*.

The editors claim that "Visit Port

Status symbol

JOURNAL OF THE FANTASTIC IN THE ARTS
Vol 2 #4

A5, 152pp paperback, $6.95 (4/$25) from Orion Publishing, 3959 Rte. 31, Suite 210, Liverpool, NY 13090, USA (£3:50 or 4/£12:50 from the NSFA)

JFA is not like most critical magazines, being a learned journal in the traditional sense, with an editorial board that counts Brian Aldiss, Stephen Donaldson, Brooks Landon and Brian Stableford among its members. All the articles are academic papers, complete with notes and references, and many of the contributors are Professors of English, Art History or Film Studies at various American universities.

This issue contains an examination by Jane P. Davidson of how wolves, witches and werewolves were portrayed in popular culture and literature from 1423 to 1700, and Francine A. Koslow's discussion of how the depiction of Dante's *Inferno* differs between the Romantic painters such as Blake, Rodin and Dore, and contemporary artists such as Rico LeBrun and Robert Rauschenberg. As essentially descriptive (as opposed to analytic) works, both papers provide interesting and accessible overviews of their chosen subjects.

At the other extreme, Karen Michalson's "Phantasy as Deconstruction" and Frank Burke's "Alterity and Self-Other Mirroring in Horror Film and Criticism" do presuppose an extensive appreciation of the theory and philosophy involved if the reader is to benefit fully from their material.

One of the weaker papers is Patricia Monk's explanation of the growing popularity of 'shared universe' works in speculative fiction. With great care and detail she offers a number of contributory factors – the in-group bonding peculiar to the genre, the popularity of collaboration between writers, and the increasing trend towards multipartite works or series – and describes the numerous problems encountered by writers participating in work of this nature. What she omits to consider is perhaps the most obvious factor of all: the commercial pressure from publishers simply wanting more of the same as quickly and as cheaply as possible.

Most engaging through is Mervyn Nicholson's discussion of the fantastic in the work of Byron, and how the fantasy of disaster is an expression of the poet's anarchist-existentialist philosophy. Even without a particular familiarity with Byron's verse, I still found this a fascinating explanation of his literary theory.

As you can imagine, *JFA* does not lend itself to casual browsing, although the overall presentation is very tidy, with many full-page reproductions of the works referred to in the text. It's not as heavy going as some of the titles might suggest, though I don't recommend trying to read this from cover to cover in one sitting!

Those worried that speculative fiction is not taken seriously by the mainstream establishment should take heart that, with *JFA*, it at last receives critical recognition from outside the genre. ❑

Watson!" is a reprint from an obscure magazine. The article purports to be a piece of travel writing about an anarchist utopia, but one can detect the hand of a certain R.A. Wilson in it. God, I hope I'm wrong – this place deserves to exist.

Rudy Rucker's own story, "Rapture In Space", starts out in PKD land and finishes in Rucker territory. No-hoper Denny gets sold a phonebot (called Phil) which is supposed to make him rich through selling copies of itself, but fails entirely. Hilarious piece of fun.

Paul Di Filippo can be patchy but, at his best, he is stunning. "Solitons" is Di Filippo at his best.

Damn it, there's too many works of sheer excellence to go into detail. Rachael Pollack, Michael Blumlein, Lewis Shiner, Richard Kadrey, Marc Laidlaw and Barrington Bayley all supply the sort of stories that make aspiring writers want to pour lighter fuel over their keyboards and give up in disgust.

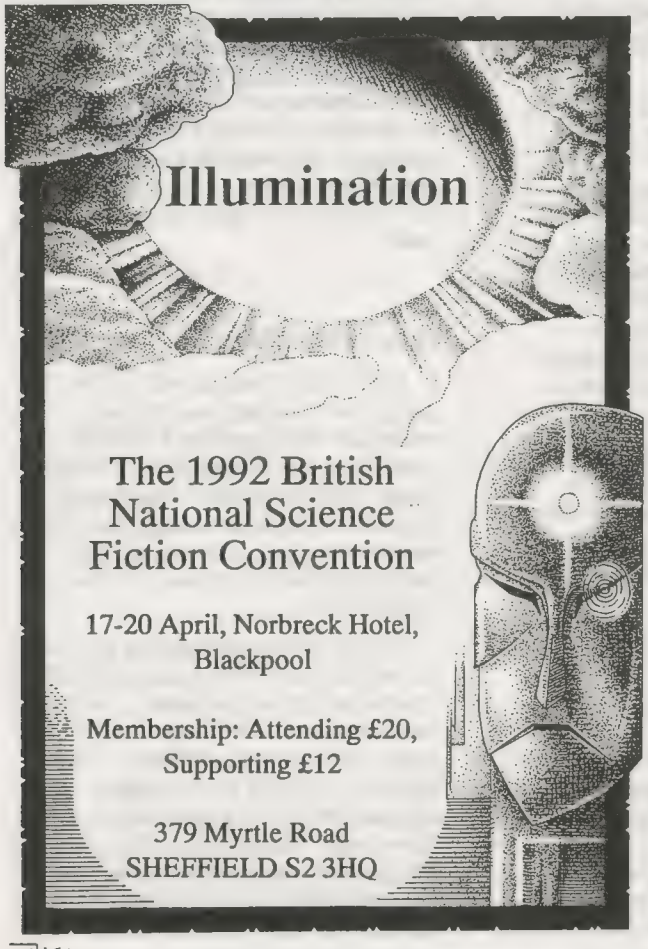
Two of the most rewarding pieces come from Sharon Gannon & David Life, and Hugh Fox, both stories heavily utilising Gnostic philosophy. By way of contrast, Bart Plantenga's "The Beer Mystic's Last Day On The Planet" heavily utilises gonzo philosophy. I'm putting money on both modes to be major SF movements of the 90s.

Where *Semiotext(e)* is somewhat inconsistent is with its short-shorts, which range from the perfect (t. Winter-Damon, Nick Herbert) to the pointless (William Burroughs' "The CIA Reporter", Ron Kolm).

Mention must also be made of the layout, artwork, and collages. This is a handsome volume.

Okay – I am willing to concede that the Toshiba HP Waldo is pretty childish.

Jim Steel ❑



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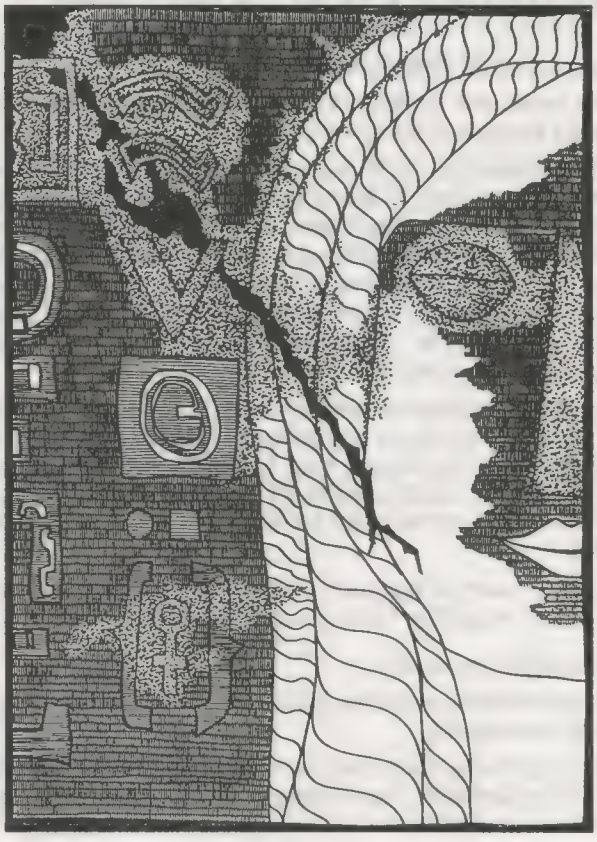

In BBR #19 ❑ New fiction by ❑ Misha ❑ Diana Reed ❑ Alison Sinclair ❑ Artwork by ❑ Anne Stephens ❑ Kevin Cullen ❑ Jason Hurst ❑ Plus ❑ Maureen Porter ❑ *Mogollón News* ❑ **BBR** *Review*

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LETTERS LETTERS LETTERS LETTER

We welcome all comments – good or bad – about *BBR*. Write to *BBR*, Chris Reed, PO Box 625, Sheffield S1 3GY. Letters may be edited or shortened for reasons of space.

Glorifying the offensive

From: **Andrew Green, Sheffield**

As usual, the stories in **BBR** #17 offered innovative ideas and treatments which I enjoyed reading – except one.

So I looked hard to find something of interest which I might have missed in Rick Cadger's story "A Pinch Of ...". Innovation in language, in structure, in subject matter? Nothing there: conventional, cliché-ridden. Interesting plot? The ending had been obvious before I'd read half-way through. Engaging characters? No information about them. So what is the point of this piece? So far as I could detect, it was written in order to include accounts of torture and killing carried out for other people's amusement – and described for the reader's entertainment.

Violence to people's bodies resulting in disfigurement and death, carried out for nothing other than the gratification of spectators, is a serious matter, and I find the use of the subject here, for further amusement, disgusting. The story is either mindless and incompetent, or worse – glorifying its offensive subject matter. It fulfills none of the purposes of horror writing, and falls outside that genre.

I hope never to see such a piece in **BBR** again. Should I do so, I won't want to see the magazine itself in future. ❑

Rick Cadger comments:

I have no problem with the first part of your letter; it is straight criticism, and I thank you for the feed-back.

The fact that you fail to perceive any of the *real* horror that I tried to convey in the story disappoints me – not least because it suggests that the story doesn't work on the level it was intended to.

You seem to have a rigid (although unspecified) idea of what horror is not. Let me tell you what I think horror *is*. It is confrontation. It is facing up to what terrifies or disturbs you. Occasionally the *threat* of that confrontation is enough. In "A Pinch of..." I confronted two things which I regarded as disturbing. Firstly, the fear of betrayal and exploitation by those in positions of almost sacred trust. The second thing I tackled was a question which I now put to you. If a video of the type we are concerned with came into your possesion, and you had an opportunity to sit at home with no fear of interruption or discovery ... would you watch it? Be honest. I had to face the fact that I probably would take a look. Not because it would make me drool, or give me a hard-on, but because I am as reluctantly fascinated by death as I am afraid of it. But regardless of my reasons for viewing the hypothetical film, in doing so I would become one of the consumers of Baxter's sick product – part of the demand he supplies. Now that is frightening.

As for the violence, it was in no way gratuitous in intent. The words 'snuff movie' just don't do justice to the horrors they name; read the graphic torture scenes – *then* you have something to be disgusted at. Something to make you realise just how much you are admitting if you said "Yes, I would look at the film".

From the tone of your letter horror is obviously not for you. God forbid you should ever discover Shaun Hutson. ❑

From: **John Francis Haines, Warrington**

Tim Nickels put his finger on the real problem when he said "be aware of the vast and disinterested enemy without". At best SF gets shoved into a little bag marked 'genre fiction' which then means the critic is automatically excused any further discussion as the type of fiction involved is, by definition, not worth discussing.

I think there is a parallel danger of SF's establishment taking the same attitude to the small press SF community as the literary establishment does to SF as a whole. It is because of this danger that I feel it is becoming all the more important that the small press SF community should unite and cease bickering. If we can't eliminate wrong-headed thinking among our own, what hope have we got of convincing a hostile literary world that we are worth considering as serious writers?

At the same time we must try and educate the uncommitted reader, and by extension, the uncommitted critics, that SF has more to offer than escapism, and should be viewed as a valid branch of literature. A literary world which values only 'realism' and to whom avant-garde means the *manner* of writing rather than its substance will always belittle SF if we let it. We will only have ourselves to blame if we let them get away with it. ❑

From: **P.J.L. Hinder, Bristol**

Thanks for **BBR** #17, which was excellent. I liked Michael Marrak's cover, I liked all the fiction, but I didn't understand what the hell the Incunabula Press were on about, except that they stand to make a good deal of money from it, judging by their prices.

By far the best item, though, was Philip Gladwin's "The Days of Increasing Automation". I can't remember seeing this theme handled so well. Usually the author has an axe to grind, and wants to put it, when sharpened, into the command circuitry of any AIs that happen to be around. Here instead we are shown the likely consequences in human terms of such ignorant, chronocentric attitudes. As well as being extremely well written and plotted, Mr Gladwin reminds us that it isn't just changes in sea level we're going to be dealing with in the next few hundred years, but changes in the nature of consciousness itself. ❑

From: **Mike O'Driscoll, Swansea**

I hate to bring this up, what the hell was going on with this Incunabula Press catalogue? Was it genuine? And if so, where does one write to get hold of some of these "rare and hermetic" paperbacks!? Or was it some fiendishly clever piece of fiction as advertising copy, courtesy of Peter Lamborn Wilson? Whatever, it baffled and infuriated me.

Nicholas Royle gave another surrealistic tale with an oddly moving ending, and Phillip Gladwin's story was outstanding, reminding me somewhat of John Sladek's "Roderick" books. Rick Cadger's "A Pinch of..." was effective but maybe he should have admitted the debt this story owed to Croneberg's "Videodrome." Miles Hadfield's story was an interesting experiment that ultimately didn't work. His prose is near faultless and the themes he tackles – memory and loss, decay and resurrection –

are brave ones. But it is his use of jaded archetypes to convey symbolism that pissed me off. A little characterisation here would not have gone astray; a little warmth invested in the narrator/pariah might have made me take more interest in his fate. Still, it is the sort of experimental story that **BBR** thrives on, and I think Hadfield is going to be one hell of a writer. By the way, Alfred Klosterman's art for "The Cruellest Month," was the best illustration in this issue. ❑

From: Carl Midgley, Bradford

The highlight of **BBR** #17 had to be Rick Cadger's "A Pinch of ...", a very, very nasty piece of work. As for the Incunabula Press insert, I'm still deciding what's going on. Either you're taking the piss or somebody believes this stuff, very Dickian, I mean the CIA & KGB just aren't good enough for these guys, they've got to go and make up their own initials. ❑

From: Andrew Caines, Bangor

Thanks for **BBR** #17 – another excellent issue, the highlight for me was the Incunabula Press catalogue – whatever it was exactly – at first glance I thought it was a 'real' catalogue, then when I started reading it I thought 'what?' – obviously a fictional work – either way it was good fun and a more interesting format than a straightforward short story. Please, more of this sort of thing. I personally like to read the Counter Productions catalogue, the *Small Press Yearbook* and *Scavenger's Newsletter* as pseudo fiction – surely this is SF – almost performance art interactive fiction. ❑

From: Rick Cadger, Dunstable

Your letters page is shaping up very nicely, with many correspondents making deadly enemies all over the place – great stuff. I think Peter Tennant's slap to Dave Hughes' wrist was in part justified. Dave is sometimes a trifle vehement in his attitude to those who show even a hint of intolerance toward experimental writing. I don't think that there can be any such thing as "too weird" provided the writing is sincere, and not just some prat being obscure to cover up the fact that he can't write conventionally structured prose. But in defending freedom of expression for writers of all styles in the manner he does, Dave runs the risk of stifling that same freedom for those wishing to offer genuine criticism; and he must bear in mind that for some people, experimental writing will sometimes come across as self-indulgent and largely worthless – and this is bound to be reflected in their (hopefully sincere) comments. ❑

From: Peter Tennant, Thetford, Norfolk

"The Cruellest Month" by Miles Hadfield is a superb story. The sparse, economic prose and the choppy flow of events carry the reader along effortlessly. There are images to delight and astound, a storyline that is tightly plotted without a wasted sentence, culminating in an ending that is as logical as it is unexpected. Miles Hadfield will be a writer to watch.

The letter column in **BBR** #17 again seems concerned with *Interzone*'s state of health. I think I agree with Mark Haw, that it's a question of attitude more than anything else. The *Interzone* gang seem far too pleased with themselves by half at times, especially considering that despite their circulation boost they still appear to need Arts Council funding. To quote David Pringle in #37's "Interface" column, "After *New Worlds* folded, there were many more-or-less abortive attempts to found a new British SF magazine ... Nor, in spite of *Interzone*'s existence, do the attempts cease." The obvious question of course is, why should they? It seems as if *Interzone*'s editor regards his magazine as the be all and end all of speculative fiction publishing in Britain. It's an unhealthy viewpoint, and can only detract from his very real achievement in putting British science fiction back on the map.

I agree with Peter Sidell that your criticism of *Interzone*'s fiction content is not entirely justified. They do support new writers and they do publish stories that are challenging, thought-provoking, and stimulating. Unfortunately it seems that recent issues have been a touch too staid and conventional. Conversely of late the letter column seems to feature only applause and commendations. Make of that what you will.

I'd like to approach the argument from a different angle though and ask a question that doesn't seem to have occurred to anyone. Just exactly how progressive is **BBR**? This issue we have "A Pinch of ..." by Rick Cadger. Admittedly he's a relatively new author but the story itself doesn't break down any barriers, unless of course you haven't read any horror fiction in the past twenty years. In #16 Paul Di Filippo's "Fleshflowers" was standard SF fare with a dollop of sex, that wouldn't have looked out of place in *Interzone*, or even in *Dream*. Almost similar comments apply to the stories by Mark Iles and by David B. Riley in **BBR** #15. If anything these two probably wouldn't be risky enough for *Interzone*. Going back further still you've published S.M. Baxter who's so routine he makes *Interzone*'s current favourites, Stableford and Shaw, seem exciting.

I'm not criticising **BBR**'s choice of material. You know that I liked all of these stories. The blend of traditional styles with new works is a great part of what makes **BBR** such a damned good magazine. What I am saying though is that when it comes to criticising *Interzone* for conventionality you should perhaps run an eye over your own contents first. ❑

From: Jael Nuit, editor *The Hardcore*, Beckenham, Kent

I am afraid that you have overpraised us and we shall never be able to meet our reputation. For better or worse there will be few of the type of critical articles in issue 5 that were so much in evidence in issue 4. Instead the readers will get an increased dose of the comic strips and fiction that seemed so out of place before. We also hope to be going in directions utterly unexpected, but when one has a magazine as young as *The Hardcore*, one is forever reinventing it.

BBR #17 is an eclectic mix indeed. I wish there was more fiction and the Ramsey Campbell interview was not half as long as I wanted it to be, but the catalogue in the middle was just wonderful. I can just imagine the hundreds of collectors who will be seeking the esoterics presented within, it is a superior successor to Peter Lamborn Wilson's "Ongs Hat" from *Edge Detector*. ❑

From: Roger Thomas, Amersham, Bucks

BBR #17 contained much news of interest. For the magazine to have achieved newstrade distribution is a remarkable development. There are some interesting parallels in, for example, the music press, with independent magazines like *Lime Lizard* and *Straight No Chaser* arriving regularly on the shelves alongside their establishment counterparts. I promise to harangue any newsagent who doesn't stock **BBR** to do so (while continuing to subscribe myself, of course) and would urge other readers to do the same.

Talking of music, I was intrigued to see that you've received a letter from one Glenn Branca of New York. Is this the same Glenn Branca who, when not reading Mick Farren novels, is one of my favourite proto-thrash minimalist composer-musicians with several excellent albums out and whose London concert posters carried warnings about the anticipated volume levels? Surely, 'tis he. There seems to be a degree of inter-consumption between producers of unusual fiction and producers of unusual music, exemplified by track titles such as "Dr Adder" (Elliott Sharp) and "The Sprawl" (Last Exit). Roll on the world's first slipstream jazz-hardcore opera ... ❑

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